

THE DANCE OF CONVERSATION: GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN METAPHORS FOR WEST COAST SWING PARTNERSHIP

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1. Introduction

Gender-focused language reform has been a prominent topic in public discourse over the past few years (e.g., Hanna et al. 2019; Saguy & Williams 2019; Cohen & Gallois 2021); however, it is not a new phenomenon. The gender-focussed language reform movements of today build upon feminist activism dating back to the 1970s and 80s which, amongst other things, promoted the use of neutral, balanced, or feminized generics for both generic pronouns and role nouns like employment titles (e.g., Moulton, Robinson & Elias 1978; Martyna 1983; Sniezek & Jazwinski 1986; Bodine 1998/1975). Significant progress has been made;¹ however, gender remains a key predictor of behavioural expectations in many aspects of economic and social life, including artistic and leisure pursuits, such as dance. Many social partner dance communities, including ballroom, salsa, tango, and various types of swing, have long been structured around a heteronormative model of partnership, with dances taking place between couples consisting of a man, who leads, and a woman, who follows. However, in the current social climate, where gender expression and identity are increasingly topics of public discourse, a number of dance communities are beginning to question these traditionally strongly gendered roles. While some communities, such as Lindy Hop, are quite far down this path, and others such as salsa have barely begun, West Coast Swing (WCS), a modern swing dance, is currently in the midst of a very active movement to *degender* the roles of leader and follower, as well as the gendered terms traditionally used to refer to them, such that all dancers may freely participate in their preferred role regardless of their gender (see Table 1 for a graphical representation of this shift).

Table 1. Traditional vs. degendered partnership models

	Traditional	Degendered
Partnership	1 man + 1 woman	Any 2 people
Who leads?	man	leader (any gender)
Who follows?	woman	follower (any gender)

¹ Consider, for example, the shift away from generic “he” (see e.g., Pauwels 2001) and the shift in perceptions of those who still use it (McConnell-Ginet 1998/1989), as well as the numerous national and institutional policies on and guidelines for the use of gender-fair language (see Sczesny, Formanowicz & Moser 2016).

In some ways, this degendering can be seen as an extension of WCS's relatively egalitarian partnership structure. Unlike in many partner dances, in contemporary WCS both the leader and the follower can influence movement choices for the couple (Callahan 2005). One of the most prevalent ways of describing this conception of partnership is through the metaphor WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION. This metaphor is typically used as liberatory metaphor, suggesting an open exchange of ideas between leader and follower (e.g., Callahan, 2005; Cox, 2012) that is broadly in line with the egalitarian motives of the degendering movement overall. However, in practice, the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor often reveals criteria for appropriate "talk" that differ significantly by role and, in doing so, continues to draw on gendered social expectations. This study uses Koller's (2004) Critical Cognitive Metaphor Framework to explore the deployment of this metaphor in an episode of a popular WCS podcast, and in doing so considers the metaphor's role in constructing expectations for participants in both the leader and follower roles.

2. Background

Though leading and following roles have historically been strongly heteronormatively gendered in most social partner dances,² WCS has played with the fixity of these roles as early as the 1990s, when the community began to organize humorous "switch it up" style competitions (Lavin 2019). In these competitions, dancers engage in sort of drag, with men playing exaggerated feminine follower personae and women playing exaggerated masculine personae as leaders. In very limited cases dancers' requests to dance in a non-traditional role in serious competitions were also granted in the 1990s and early 2000s (Lavin 2019). However, it wasn't until 2014 when degendering activists came together on social media that serious change began to take place (Lavin 2019). Using petitions, direct appeals to event organizers, protest dancing, and impassioned video presentations distributed widely across social media, these activists have sought to remove gender restrictions from all WCS competitions. As shown in Figure 1, significant progress has been made, with nearly 70% of WCS events worldwide having been reported to allow dancers to participate in Jack 'n' Jill competitions (also referred to as JnJs) in their preferred role as of 2020 (Stokes 2020). JnJs have long been a key competitive category in WCS and they are the only contest whose results are tracked in the World Swing Dance Council (WSDC) points registry which controls dancers' competitive levels. In these competitions, dancers enter as a leader or follower (traditionally this has been constrained by gender), draw a random partner of the opposite role, and improvise to a randomly selected song. Because of the importance to JnJs for competitive ranking and their focal position in weekend events, the rules applied to them serve as a bellwether for the community as a whole. Further, in addition to JnJs, the premier choreography contest,

² Contact Improvisation provides an important counter example in which both partners lead and follow and gender does not predict partnerships or roles, however it is a fairly unique example which emerged mainly amongst professional modern dancers experimenting with new ways of moving (Novack 1990) as opposed to other partner dances which have their origins in non-professional, social spaces.

NASDE (National Association of Swing Dance Events) has also removed the gendered restrictions on dance roles in choreographed routines as of 2018 (Lavin 2019).

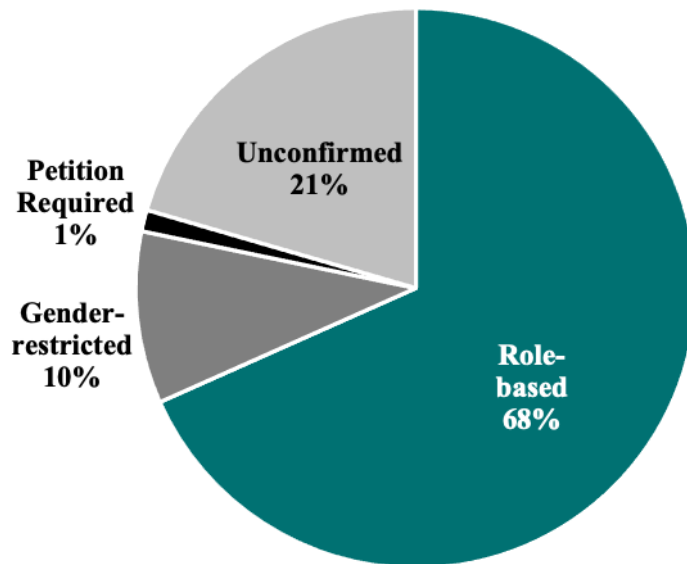


Figure 1. Distribution of WSDC affiliated events (n=161) by JnJ rule type. Adapted from Stokes (2020). Data are provided by event directors, activists, and other community participants, and compiled by Laurissa Stokes into an online community resource that is updated as new information is reported.

In addition to these official rule changes, degendering activists have also pushed for linguistic changes across both social (i.e., dance parties, practices, and meetups, as well as formal competitions) and pedagogical (i.e., classes, workshops, private lessons, etc.) contexts in the WCS community. I have observed this shift and the discourse around it informally over my 12 years of engagement with the WCS community. Where previously a class might be divided into “ladies” and “gentlemen” or “girls” and “guys”, those who support degendering are now pushing for instructors and others to use the gender-neutral categories of “followers” and “leaders”. Similarly, there has been a push towards using singular “they” as a generic pronoun for both dance roles, rather than the traditional “he” for leaders and “she” for followers.

In a pilot study of data from the same podcast (O’Neill 2021), I investigated the distribution of gendered and degendered generic references to the two dance roles, and found that the two hosts of the podcast, Deborah Szekely and Eric Jacobson,³ differed

³ Deborah Szekely and Eric Jacobson are well-known public figures in the WCS community, both because of their work as dance professionals (see Section 3) and, more significantly, because of their roles as the hosts of a popular WCS podcast, *The Naked Truth*, from which the data for this research is drawn. Thus, I treat both as public figures and retain their names in text. All of the data used in this study is extracted from a publicly available and widely promoted episode of *The Naked Truth* that is available from a public archive on the podcast website (<https://thenakedtruthwcs.com/episodes/>) and from a wide variety of podcast subscription services such as Spotify, iTunes, Google Podcasts, and more.

substantially in their use of degendered terms (76% vs. 94% of, respectively, 233 and 403 relevant references to dance roles). Also of note, however, is the fact that even Jacobson, who was explicitly committed to degendering (see Section 3) and who used degendered terms in 94% of relevant instances, nonetheless continued to use gendered pronouns some of the time, and those gendered pronouns were used in ways that suggest the persistence of underlying heteronormatively gendered conceptual models. Specifically, this speaker used gendered pronouns when making a sexual joke about the dance roles, when talking about generic partners to individuals whose gender was already known or was established in the conversation, and when performatively voicing dance students or other lower status community members. In all of these instances of gendered pronoun use, the speaker's choice of pronoun accords with the heteronormative stereotype that men lead, women follow, and a partnership is composed of one man and one woman. These findings suggest that despite the speaker's commitment to degendering, his underlying conceptual models remain heteronormatively gendered. This is not surprising, as Ehrlich & King (1994) found that often in gender-based language reform, the introduction of gender-fair neologisms is not enough to break down underlying sexist ideologies. However, the apparent persistence of such gendered concepts, even in speakers who have purposefully and successfully adopted degendered language highlights important tensions within and around the degendering movement, and indeed around the very concept of socially motivated language reform. For example, can a change in labelling practices create real, meaningful change around a concept as socially ingrained as gender? Or will degendered language continue to encode gendered divisions and biases merely using new reformed labels.

The concept of dance partnership, including expectations surrounding the partners' respective roles and behaviours is not only constructed at the level of lexical labels, however. Due to the challenges of putting embodied movement and experience into words, dancers commonly employ metaphors to articulate the expectations for and experiences of leading, following, and dance partnership in general. Given the power of metaphor in structuring social reality (Lakoff & Johnson 2003) and naturalizing hegemonic discourses (Melissa Walters-York 1996; Koller 2004), such metaphors represent an important site for exploring the ways that gendered divisions and biases are or are not being retained in the social construction of the dance roles, beneath superficially degendered lexical labels. Hence, this study explores the use of metaphors for partnership and dance roles in WCS looking particularly at gender and power dynamics within the metaphorical constructs.

3. Data and methodology

Following O'Neill (2021), this study uses data drawn from a well-known podcast made by and for WCS dancers: *The Naked Truth*.⁴ As previously mentioned, the podcast, was hosted by Deborah Szekely and Eric Jacobson; while the podcast is not officially defunct,

⁴ <https://thenakedtruthwcs.com/>

Deborah left the show in late 2019⁵ and no new episodes have been published since May 23, 2020. Deborah, who has been part of the WCS community for over 25 years, was (and still is) a full-time international touring professional, teaching, judging, and competing at the highest level (Szekely 2019). In some episodes of the podcast (e.g., Jacobson & Szekely 2018), she has exhibited ambivalence towards degendering, arguing that while she supports people dancing in their preferred role, same-gender couples should compete in a separate division because gender fundamentally influences the dance. Eric also teaches, judges, and competes, though only part-time and at a slightly lower level than Deborah (Jacobson 2019). He has spent more than 15 years in the WCS community, but unlike Deborah espouses a fairly straightforwardly supportive alignment to the degendering movement throughout the podcast, and, as we have seen, acts in accordance with that alignment, using degendered language in 94% of relevant instances versus Szekely's 76%.⁶ Though the two hosts have somewhat different stances towards degendering and differ consequently in their use of degendered language, both use a range of metaphors for WCS partnership.

The 92-minute episode, "Leading and Following" (Jacobson & Szekely 2019), which was the focus of the present study, is a one-on-one discussion between the two hosts. They focus on WCS partnership dynamics in teaching, dancing, and judging, providing a range of contexts for articulating partnership. At the time that this episode aired (February 2019), *The Naked Truth* was probably the most popular media production in the community. Thus, it provides a valuable snapshot of the discourse circulating within the WCS community. Though the discourse of media personalities may or may not reflect the discourse of the actual public, it circulates and is therefore present in the public consciousness and available to be responded to by other members of the community.

The data was analysed following Koller's (2004) Critical Cognitive Metaphor Framework. This framework brings together cognitive metaphor theory and critical discourse analysis, allowing the analyst to bridge the gap between cognitive processes and social systems through explorations of metaphor construction and deployment. There are, however, some challenges in employing this framework to analyse speech rather than text data, particularly in terms of counting instances of metaphor. Koller (2004) used corpus methods to quantify metaphors by enumerating all occurrences of words drawn from the metaphor's source domain. While this approach is highly productive for

⁵ Out of a commitment to transparency and scientific integrity, and out of respect for the WCS community and the experiences of its members, I am compelled to disclose that Deborah left the podcast in the wake of a scandal in which there were reports of her engaging in racially insensitive behaviour, such as grabbing a Black convention volunteer's hair without consent and failing to understand why that behaviour was problematic.

⁶ In a debate about degendering in "The Open 2018" (Jacobson & Szekely 2018), Eric disavows the term "degendering" but states his firm support for the social shift which this name describes. While many members of the community do not necessarily align with this term, I retain it here because it remains the most broadly recognizable term for the movement, likely because it is included in the name of the Facebook group *Degendering West Coast Swing*, where much of the movement's organizing has taken place.

carefully edited (i.e., written) texts, unscripted, conversational speech is not as carefully organized. Notably, in the data at hand, metaphors were often accompanied by extensive explication that also used words from the source domain. In order to account for this and avoid over-counting metaphors, the unit of quantification in this study was not individual source domain-associated tokens, but rather entire stretches of talk where a given metaphorical complex is instantiated. For example, the passage in (1) below, despite having a number of words from the source domain (e.g., “volleyball”, “opponent”, “spike”, “ball”) was counted as only two instances of the metaphor WCS PARTNERSHIP IS PLAYING SPORTS, because despite all the explication, there are only two links drawn between the source domain (PLAYING SPORTS) and the target domain (WCS PARTNERSHIP), one to volleyball and one to basketball, both illustrating what Deborah sees as a need to look at your opponent/partner’s centre.

- (1) D: if I'm at the net and I'm playing volleyball I'm not looking at my opponent's face
I'm looking at my opponent's body so when I see her jump up for the spike I can
jump up and block (.) the ball same thing with basketball I look at my partner's
y'know centre so I can grab the ball
E: mhmm
D: uh if I need to so I tell my followers that I keep my head up and I scan with my
eyes and I look at my partner's (.) y'know centre
(ln 448-453)⁷

Following Koller (2004), after quantifying the metaphorical constructions, I then analyzed the extracted metaphors from both cognitive and critical discourse analysis perspectives in order to determine what the metaphors say about the speakers’ conceptual models and the ideologies that underlie their constructions what it is to be a leader, a follower, and/or a dance partnership.

4. Metaphorical constructions of dance partnership

The quantitative analysis found a number of metaphors for dance partnership and the roles of leader and follower. These included:

- WCS PARTNERSHIP IS SEX: following the classic saying “dance is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire”, these metaphors link WCS partnerships to sex or other sexual behaviours (e.g., “we think that's the way they are in bed” (E, ln 368)),
- WCS PARTNERSHIP IS DRIVING A CAR: in this metaphor, the follower is typically depicted as the car and the leader as the driver (e.g., “I just tell them to stay in idle like a car” (D, ln 1005)),

⁷ Transcription conventions are adapted from Rampton (1995). For the data displayed in this paper, the pertinent conventions (.) marking pauses of less than one second, hyphens marking cut off speech, and block capitals marking LOUD enunciation. Speakers are identified by first initial (E for Eric Jacobson; D for Deborah Szekely) and the transcript line numbers are provided at the end of each example.

- FOLLOWING IS DECORATING: this metaphor constructs the actions of the follower as decoration or embellishment (e.g., “I try to decorate and paint along the way” (E, ln 52)) of a shape or space created by the leader (LEADING IS CREATING SHAPES; LEADING IS CREATING SPACE),
- ASSERTIVE FOLLOWING IS HIJACKING: this metaphor frames certain types of follower behaviours (e.g., initiating movements assertively) as hijacking analogous to hijacking a vehicle (e.g., “you should not be hijacking in that you should not be ignoring the leader’s intent” (E, ln 318)),
- WCS PARTNERSHIP IS GOING ON A JOURNEY: in this metaphor the dance is constructed as travel or a journey, sometimes a train journey, that the leader is taking the follower on (e.g., “the leaders take the followers on a journey” (D, ln 17)),
- WCS PARTNERSHIP IS A CONVERSATION: this metaphor links the physical communication between partners to talking, listening, and more broadly to conversation (e.g., “it’s just like a conversation” (E, ln 227)).

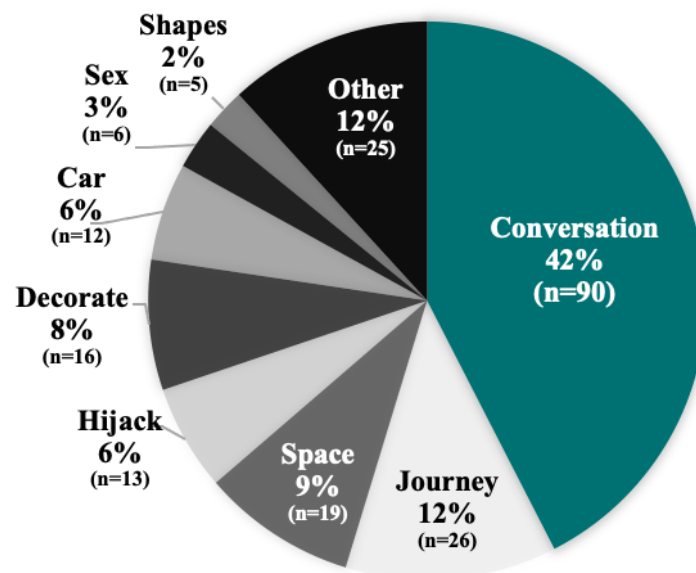


Figure 2. Distribution of complex metaphors for dance partnership and the associated roles of leading and following in the data set.

As seen in Figure 2, 42% of the complex metaphorical constructions in the data deployed the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor and, considering the broader WCS discourse, that’s not surprising. Conversation metaphors are pervasive in discussions of WCS partnership, both in popular instructors’ blogs (2a) and academic research on the dance (2b), as well as in my own anecdotal experience within the community. As seen in examples (2a-b), this metaphor is often used to mark WCS as unique from other dances, because of its relatively more egalitarian partnership dynamics.

- (2) a. While there is structure, there exists far more of a conversation in WCS than in other dance styles. (Cunningham 2018)
- b. The unique opportunity for conversation, instead of following direction, as a follow is one of the things that intrigued me about West Coast Swing. (Cox 2012)

This idea that WCS is egalitarian like conversation also appears in the podcast. The hosts discuss how “one sided conversation[s]” (D, ln 115) are undesirable in a dance and that “it wasn't supposed to be the leader just speaks and the follower just listens” (E, ln 201). When applying the CONVERSATION metaphor to the partnership as a whole, the metaphor is consistently used to construct WCS as an egalitarian—rather than sexist—form of partner dancing, which entails an equal exchange of ideas in contrast to those dances in which leaders dominate the dance and dictate to the followers. Whether or not this is an accurate representation of the dance, its presentation as an ideal speaks powerfully to the importance of non-sexist and egalitarian partnership dynamics in the WCS public discourse. However, when the metaphor is used to construct the ideal behaviour of followers and leaders as individuals, a quite different pattern emerges.

Amongst the CONVERSATION metaphors that are applied specifically to leaders and leading, the action of leading and the role of leaders are predominantly constructed as talking. In fact, nearly 40% of conversation metaphors applied to leaders and leading represent the action of leading as a direct voicing of intent as seen in Examples (3-4), whereas less than 8% of CONVERSATION metaphors applied to followers are constructed thusly. Additionally, while leaders are cautioned against doing all the talking or never listening (5-6), there is no expectation that they should listen as much as they talk, only that they should listen sometimes, and occasionally give the follower an opportunity to talk.

- (3) E: the leader has said don't move (ln 1011)
- (4) E: the leader will assert him or herself and say this is what we're doing now (ln 225)
- (5) D: the leader shouldn't be dictating y'know a hundred percent y'know of the dance because then it's just him talking at her (ln 497)
- (6) D: I think that leaders just don't listen enough when followers do- do it (ln 1107)

Of course, if leading is talking and the leader is doing most of that talking, the follower is listening and that is indeed borne out in the data. The majority of metaphorical constructions that link followers and CONVERSATION, place them in the role of listeners (7). Further, a dichotomy is set up between true or “straight up” followers and followers who are “loud” or who “talk” (8). This is reinforced by Deborah’s comment in (9) referring to “talking” or offering ideas as a “hard concept” because of her extreme follower identity. So, while some followers may talk, the conceptual model that seems to

be employed here is that of a canonical follower who only listens, or of following as listening. Thus, in this data we see a shift away from a fully egalitarian conversation towards a construction of the roles in line with a fairly strict division of labour along traditional lines, in which the leader mainly “talks”, and the follower mainly “listens”.

- (7) E: I want a follower who is paying attention and listening (ln 269)
- (8) E: followers who are either a little more straight on the following others who are louder (ln 44)
- (9) D: it's a hard concept uh for me because I'm such a follower (ln 1077)

However, it is not enough for the follower to merely “listen”. They are also expected to “contribute” to the conversation, but only in circumscribed ways that “respond” to the leader or fit into the conversation that the leader has already begun (10-11).

- (10) E: I want that- what they contribute to the conversation to be a part of the conversation I want it to be engaging I want it to offer substance (ln 52)
- (11) E: I want a follower who is paying attention and listening I do also want a follower who isn't afraid to respond or contribute ideas (ln 269-70)

When followers do not contribute in supportive or responsive ways, they are sanctioned for interrupting or being disruptive (12-14), a construction which is never applied to leaders or leading. Even when leaders reject the follower's idea as illustrated in Example (15), it is not framed as interrupting. Because leaders are *meant* to be “talking”, they are never seen as disruptive even if they cut off the follower's intent; however, because followers are constructed as mainly “listening”, only contributing in response and when given an opportunity, they can easily end up being seen as disruptive, despite their relatively lesser quantity of “talk”.

- (12) E: I don't want to say hey how was your day and you go CHOCOLATE because that's just like you're hijacking the conversation (ln 293)
- (13) E (speaking as a follower): it's my job to find a way to bring that into the conversation (.) and help my leader hear the music the way I hear it (.) um again without being disruptive (ln 61-62)
- (14) E: I don't want to be doing all the talking but I don't want them to be interrupting (ln 49)
- (15) D: the leader's like NO we're gonna do this and do it now (ln 1110)

There is also a marked difference in the evaluations of individuals repeating or copying their partner's bodily stylizations. Where a leader is "stealing the follower's thunder" (D, ln 571) a very agentive positioning; the follower is "repeating like a parrot" (D, ln 586) implying that they have no ideas or agency of their own. Here the follower is not just constructed as a primarily listening subject, but also as a disempowered subject whose thunder can be stolen but who can only hope to parrot things back in return. Finally, while there is only one mention of a leader talking at an unacceptable volume, and that leader is identified as a significant outlier (16), the "volume" at which followers speak is a common target of comment and critique (17-18). Followers are further criticized for having "dance Tourette's" (18) which refers to movement responses that are sudden and seem to be non-sequiturs to the leader's intent. This metaphorical link between followers' behaviour and a condition associated with involuntary movement and speech implies that followers speaking loudly, suddenly, and/or in unexpected ways is not only unacceptable, but also somehow involuntary, like a tic. Thus, in addition to being idealized as mostly passive listeners, followers are constrained in the ways that they can speak and are constructed as non-agentive, passive participants who, when they behave undesirably are often not even seen to have done so by choice, but by feebleness or an involuntary twitch.

(16) D: I feel like he's constantly screaming uh at the follower (ln 387)

(17) E: when I think of followers I think of how much do they talk how loudly do they talk (ln 39)

(18) E: there are some followers who are like straight up followers and then they all of a sudden speak very loudly like dance Tourette's (ln 45)

5. Dance as a heteronormative conversation

While the podcast hosts may construct WCS partnership as an equal exchange of ideas, the above-described patterns in how each of the roles is constructed, paint a somewhat different picture that is neither egalitarian nor entirely degendered. Instead, these patterns map quite neatly onto the findings of classic studies of white, middle class, North American, male/female conversations (e.g., Zimmerman & West 1975; Orcutt & Mennella 1995; Kendall & Tannen 1997), with followers being constructed in ways analogous to women and leaders in ways analogous to men. The leader or man does the majority of the talking; the follower or woman mainly listens (e.g., James & Drakich 1993). The follower is expected to support and pay attention, and so are women (e.g., Kendall & Tannen 1997). And finally, just as women in these studies were believed to interrupt more despite actually interrupting less (e.g., Orcutt & Mennella 1995; Lee & McCabe 2020), "interrupting" is seen as a common problem for followers but not for leaders, despite the fact that leaders are constructed as "talking" more than followers.

This parallel is reinforced by the history of critique leveled at women's speech which echoes the greater policing of followers' communication versus leaders'. Cameron

(1995; 1998)⁸ frequently points out that no matter how women speak it will be judged to be somehow flawed, even if the same language behaviour is unremarkable or even lauded in men. Similarly, in the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor, followers are subject to significantly more critique than leaders. They seem to be walking an impossible tight-rope of not interrupting (12-14) or being too loud (17-18), while still contributing and keeping it interesting for the leader (10-11), not unlike the women Cameron (1995; 1998) describes. Thus, I argue that through consideration of the construction of this ostensibly egalitarian metaphor, the traditional gendered construction of the partnership re-emerges. This suggests that the speakers' conceptual models for leaders and followers, despite their explicit support of degendering, are still nonetheless intertwined with gender and with heteronormative models of acceptable and desirable cross-gender interactions.

One could contend that these evidently heteronormative patterns are more about power and passivity than gender. Arguably, in improvisational bodily communication done at high speeds on crowded dance floors, having a passive partner and an active partner may just make sense for the mechanics of shared movement. However, the links between power and masculinity and passivity and femininity in the society in which most WCS dancers live cannot be ignored. The association between dance, particularly the passive role in dance, and femininity is heavily embedded in North American culture, hence the frequent assumptions drawn about male dancers' sexuality (Craig 2013). Furthermore, as de Beauvoir (1989) argues, passivity is marked as feminine across domains in western cultures. Thus, the link between following and femininity may be an indirect link via passivity, but the dynamic in conventional WCS partnerships as constructed using the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor is nonetheless unmistakably reflective of hegemonic gender relations.

6. Conclusion

Though the WCS community has been relatively successful in the implementation of official rule changes (Lavin 2019) and has had some success with language change, the current study suggests that superficial linguistic changes may not always correspond to shifts in speakers' conceptual models of categories for which the labels have changed. Even Eric, who uses a high rate of degendered lexical items (O'Neill 2021) and publicly supports degendering (Jacobson & Szekely 2018), still falls into heteronormative constructions of the roles, but he does so through the more opaque medium of metaphor. This offers support to Cameron (1995) and Ehrlich and King's (1992; 1994) findings that language reform alone is likely not enough to create social change—even in well-meaning individuals. Further, that this pattern is happening through metaphor suggests that it is not just social change that lags behind, but in fact cognitive change. Whereas surface forms may abide by reformist values (e.g., “leader” and “follower”), the underlying cognitive structures may be more resistant. As previously discussed, in a pilot

⁸ See also Deborah Cameron's blog *language: a feminist guide* (<https://debuk.wordpress.com/>) where she regularly reports on contemporary criticism of women's speech in the press and online.

study of this podcast (O'Neill 2021), I similarly found that when Eric uses gendered language, it tends to correspond to heteronormative assumptions and suggests that he is not yet able to personify the concepts of leader and follower without attributing binary and typically heteronormative genders. In addition, differential application of some metaphors, such as the feminized DECORATING metaphor⁹ which is only ever applied to followers, supports the construction of the roles as differentially gendered in accordance with the metaphors that are applied to them.

Thus, following Koller's (2004) critical alignment, and acknowledging that metaphor is often a powerful engine of naturalization (Melissa Walters-York 1996), I argue that studying metaphor provides a mechanism to explore the relationship between reformed language use and perhaps not so reformed conceptual categories, and further to investigate how those categories are constructed over time. This is particularly valuable in politically charged spaces like those surrounding gender, where behaviour at the lexical level is likely to be oriented towards social desirability, despite the continuing existence of underlying biases that may play a role in microaggressions, unconscious bias, and other behaviour that can be harmful to people who do not fit traditional stereotypes.

While I do not claim that either of the speakers in this podcast data are intentionally bringing gender into their metaphor use, particularly as both exhibit awareness of the social pressure to use degendered language and reduce gender bias, metaphor does offer speakers plausible deniability which allows them to hide socially risky meanings behind non-literal language (Cameron & Low 1999). Thus, a question remains in terms of how those who disagree with degendering may use tools like metaphor to construct heteronormative ideals and critique those who do not fit within the heteronormative box. This question foreshadows planned future work, which will explore metaphor in the broader WCS community in order to better identify where degendering is more or less successful and who it serves.¹⁰ This broader dataset will also facilitate deeper exploration of the interactions between social and linguistic change and the conceptual models that they are understood to act upon.

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⁹ Havenhand (2004) discusses the feminization of decorating in the context of interior design as a profession, arguing that it is feminized and marked as superficial and mimetic. The pervasive societal norms of gendered bodily decoration (e.g., make-up, jewellery, elaborate clothing) further support the presence of a feminine connotation to "decorating" and "embellishment", both of which were used to metaphorically construct following, but not leading in the podcast.

¹⁰ For example, will degendering result in anyone being able to dance in any role they please, or any cis person to dance in their preferred role?

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