

## A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS ON EMMA WATSON'S HEFORSHE CAMPAIGN SPEECH

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the social and cultural notions by capturing Emma Watson's speech on gender equality campaign to find out types of semiotic rules principles which can be applied in formal conditions as well as the function in the speech, by employing the theory of van Leeuwen (2004) on semiotic rules with 5 subcategories. The descriptive qualitative method was used in analyzing the paper, in which the data were collected randomly, then analyzed them with the five theories mentioned above, and drew conclusion based on the findings and discussion. The result of this study was divided into four parts for which it was discovered that four of the five rules were used by the speaker, and one was absent due to her own assumption about the matter and the pressure of being an ambassador. The result also demonstrated the nature of the speech as a mere promotional campaign rather than a start of a bigger movement to solve inequality problem in the society.

**Keywords:** Emma Watson, Heforshe, Speech

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the visual sign representation of Emma Watson in United Nations' HeForShe campaign, approached with semiotics rules by van Leeuwen (2004). This paper tried to give a comprehensive-discursive analysis on the content of her speech and relating it with how she presented herself in front of the people when doing the speech, as well as what she is doing in the reality as the UN representative of Goodwill Ambassador. In this context, the analysis can give a head start for United Nation to debunk the paradigm of the society about how gender equality

looks on. By understanding on how this speech can affect the world, it can also determine what drives the society to agree upon the speech, as well as do a real action towards gender equality issue.

Many assume that the issue of gender equality is the problem solely for women, yet in fact it is man's as well (Suhay, 2014). Problems of equalizing the gender are also suffered by men, in which majority of society today still assume that it is only for women, an argument that at least convinces people that sexual preference and gender stereotypes are

problems of recent society. Despite the fact that gender discriminations have lowered for the recent years (Tavares, Cavalcanti, 2007; Bohnet, et. al, 2011), people seem to greatly misunderstand what gender equality actually means and how it works, considering what has been happening in our society.

People will automatically sense a similarity between the word *feminism* as a close catalogue of meaning as *feminine*, although it is not. The latter means an act or qualities which are traditionally for a woman (Cambridge, 2008). This similar word often make a disambiguation to the word *feminism* as a movement only for female, and the male counterparts should not in any way be involved in it.

In general, the speech talks about rallying men and women to affect change in the world, when it comes to gender equality. She discusses the word "feminism" and what it means to her and what it should mean to everyone else. Some of her main claims were that men need to be just as involved in the path to gender equality as women are. However, the term feminism for many people is still foreign as it stands, yet she made this speech in a time where there is a lot of misunderstanding and incorrect usage of the word feminism.

Gender equality or feminism by definition is an idea or belief that women should be given the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way (Cambridge, 2008). The notion implies that regardless how cultural customary law see a firewoman is seemingly hard and unacceptable, but if women want to become one because it is their right

to have the same opportunities as men, then we can do nothing about it, as with the general society too.

The HeForShe campaign is a solidarity movement for gender equality which calls upon men and boys to help end the persisting inequalities faced by women and girls globally (UN, 2014). It aims to engage men and boys as agents of change for the achievement of gender equality and women's rights, by encouraging them to take action against inequalities faced by women and girls. Therefore, a campaign speech in this event indeed means that there is something wrong and needs to be changed about the issue. It can also mean that the person who speaks has to be someone who will be the role model, or somebody who has a forte, or the specialty to convince and persuade the audience, society, and the world. The speech is a trigger, a beacon to shift society paradigm as it can also act as a form of persuasion to revolute people's mind and the way they think (Quirk, 2010).

It is generally accepted that common people tend to think that gender quality is all about how women should have the same opportunities and freedom of choices as men have (McDonald, 2014). However, the fact that nowadays we already have female bus/truck drivers, doctors, lumbers, plumbers, and so on means oppression towards women's rights and opportunities have been significantly decreasing. This is the reason why the speech campaign is not only about how women should have the same chances, but also it is men who in an area

somewhere in this world who are oppressed by women, despite their dominance in physical power.

This speech, in so many ways, is indeed powerful to give insights to people who might still think about women inequality only. It also becomes our main concern to explore how powerful this speech is to the audience, and how much bias on the word meaning that can be translated flexibly on the ways depending on the context (Nemeth & Bibok, 2001). Grounded in the idea that gender equality is an issue that affects all people — socially, economically and politically — it seeks to actively involve men and boys in a movement that was originally conceived as “a struggle for women by women”. However it is seemingly clear that the notion is irrelevant according to the speech, and this is the main point on why the thesis was written at the first place.

HeForShe campaign was on 20 September, 2014 at the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York. It was hosted by UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson, whose speech — about her own path to feminism and her call to involve men and boys in promoting gender equality — was widely circulated via social media. As the ambassador is no other than a British actress who we usually recognize from Hermione, a character from Harry Potter movie franchise, we think the effects of actions by this speech will determine the whole world’s main concern regarding gender equality issue in the future.

Related to the issue being explained, her expertise in acting

industries is a supporting aspect that has to be considered with before analyzing the speech. It is indeed true that she has promoted education for girls, visiting Bangladesh and Zambia (Self, 2013) and does several gatherings there. However, the idea that she is capable in manipulating people can be a twist of plot on her, or UN’s true intentions, on the basic reason of why choosing her as a Goodwill Ambassador. This is where the research will be much focusing on, which is to investigate her speech’s true intention through the language style.

## 2. Literature Review

Firstly coined by Michael Halliday in 1978, and promptly defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, it is a branch of semiotics studies, particularly on identifying humans’ practices in social and cultural activities (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). The main point of this field that meanings and semiotic systems are formed by the idea of power on the doers which is able to do change in social systems because of their deliverance. As a combination of sociology and semiotics, it also includes how people study and translate meanings, textual and oral study, how the systems are shaped by ideology, and how it can bend to social change (Hodge and Kress, 1988).

With regard to the analysis, only (1) personal authority, (2) impersonal authority, (3) conformity, (4) role models, and (5) expertise (van Leeuwen, 2004) are used in the analysis.

### 2.1 Personal authority

Personal authority is exercised by people who: (a) are in a position of power, and (b) see no need for justifying their actions, or dictate. The rule of personal authority is always *ad hoc*, meaning that other people cannot anticipate when rules will be imposed, what they will be, or for how long they will apply. If there is any individual freedom or a difference in the substantial aspect, it is a mere privilege which must be gotten through interacting with the people being mentioned.

## 2.2 Impersonal authority

Impersonal authority is divided into two forms: (a) the authority of the written word; such as Holy Scriptures of a religion, the laws of a nation, an employment contract, etc, and (b) the authority of tradition. In the case of tradition or customary law, nothing is written down, explicitly or systematically codified. The rules are enforced by everyone, rather than by specific individuals.

## 2.3 Conformity

Conformity looks similar with tradition, but it is significantly different. Rather than doing what the group of people have always done, conformity is about doing 'what everybody else appears to be doing'. It know neither explicit codes, nor the the customs of how tradition occurs, and can be seen from what everyone looks to be doing, or in short, what it appears the most.

## 2.4 Role model

Role model is a kind of social control applied through examples given by high status people in any level of

community, including the media. It gives meaning and a social value to society on the resemblance of what they do.

## 2.5 Expertise

Expertise is about kind of skills owned by scientists or people who are well-skilled on certain aspects and justify forms of social action on the basis of natural law: that it is not wrong to do certain action as that is natural and adheres with humans' authentic sociobiological nature or with the dawn of the next evolution (van Leeuwen, 2004)

A notable previous research had been conducted regarding the knowledge of social semiotics reflects the sense of life of human beings, individually and collectively (Thibault, 1991). He argued that basically when people deliver a speech or a monologue, they tend to show and explore a self and representation aspect for them to be accepted by the audience. He then concluded by saying that the aspect of social meaning making can happen when the audience has started to accept that certain person and then listen to him/her automatically afterwards.

Another prominent research has been conducted by Couldry (2004) was examining about social semiotics through media practice. He argued that the function of media is far beyond the textual and structural content inside it, but it also transcends the awareness level of the audience through animated objects in it, such as newspapers of television. He also convinced that the audience can easily attracted to small motion of movements from any

substance of the animated advertisements, and prompting them to give more attention to it.

Nabifar (2015) presented a study on social semiotics objecting the textbooks of junior high school students in Indonesia from various subjects. The findings showed that boys are more often exist in the images, and both male and female are seen as collaborating in this book. She also agreed that both genders are trying to encourage the readers toward establishing communication by more often showing eye-to-eye contact towards each other in the images. This study has implication for students of linguistics, for course designers and for English teachers as well.

Bell (2002) conducted a study about psychology and semiotics. He carefully formulated the distinction between the expression 'identity', 'subject', 'subjectivity' and 'subjectness-in-general'. He found that basically a semiotics study is highly subjective, influenced mostly by how humans proliferate their perceptions to things they expose from their five senses. He also differentiates between contextual semiotics and cognitive psychology, in which many researchers agreed before that these two terms are quite the same, different with Bell's argument.

Another interesting study conducted by Madjid (2007), which was about a sexist language in a newspaper analyzed through verbal and visual promotional headline words. She applies the theory of signs created by Pierce (2006). She argued that the representation of women in the media cannot be overdramatized, in which it

causes certain gender to be discriminated through visual and verbal imagery. It therefore triggers a spark of disrespect towards women by men and the majority of the society.

A substantially important-to-this-research study had been conducted by Nguyen (2015), when he tried to apply Neo-Aristotelian criticism on her speech, the same one that we use in this research. Being significantly different however, he tried to give a positive support and encouragement by analyzing the speech to see the rhetorical effectiveness of the speech. He argued that she has successfully and effectively convinced the audience including the whole world that she is the perfect figure for UN Women Ambassador through her speaking, delivery, style, arrangement, style, and memory. His final words stated that UN could not have picked a better person than her, showing his utter confidence about her on solving gender inequality issue.

Suryani (2019) analyzed the rude expressions in *Instagram* social media comments from US President Donald Trump's daily posts. She tried to investigate how far people would utilize – and abuse – the idea of freedom of speech that they have to comment impolitely on the post, including the strategy of the users so the comments can sound fun and satisfying based on their own version. The result of the study shows that people are more driven to use the language because of the way how they were raised, which means it was all rooted to the culture of where the grew up. However, the research did not quite explore other possibilities such as



the influence of the environment or other aspects that could probably make them utter such things, but nonetheless, it is quite intriguing.

Ilmi (2015) also conducted a study on this particular speech, albeit using a theory of Speech Acts, particularly on Illocutionary Acts. She found that basically the speech is intended to give the audience a sense of emotional attachment towards the message. The way how the speaker delivers the message shows her strong and firm intention to bring the idea of equaling the gender bias into reality.

These studies are indeed essential to justify the credibility of analyzing our research. On a simplistic sense, none of the above previous studies mention about doing a research using social semiotics on speech or giving a tangible critic to the speech and its impact, our research is therefore justifiable. On a more complex scenario, this research is lucrative to be done because the research on UN's ambassador's speeches have been rarely done, in which this notion brings an impact on how this research can be a beacon starter to study further about social semiotics, and the knowledge of semiotics in general.

### 3. Research Methods

The data was taken from *Youtube* website on an official page of United Nation, in which therefore the authenticity of the video cannot be debated. Since this research takes on social semiotics approach, the data are only in the form of phrase or sentence in the transcription of the video (Conrad, 2002). All of the data were

collected from the internet. we took the whole transcription of the speech and considered them as purposive sampling (Tashakkori and Cresswell, 2007 as cited in Litosseliti, 2010). Since the language analysed is from an electronic source, then they will be called as a *corpus* (Conrad, 2002).

This research applied the descriptive qualitative design, in which a reality or social indication can be classified, involving fieldwork, and able to record behavior in its natural setting (Cresswell, 1994). In this case, the data collected were analyzed to reflect on, search for pattern, and try to create a full understanding of the research context (Heigham and Croker, 2009). This is what makes qualitative method different with other method, and this is one of qualitative method characteristic. After correlating the analysis to the theory, it come down to the logical explanation about the impact and implication of the research's results. Critical approach and analysis was a determining factor to give a final judgment towards the thesis in general.

Since a semiotic analysis is justified based on individual subjectivities (Bell, 2002), the findings might entice arguments from many oppositions. Nevertheless, the analysis which was related to the theory would still be in an objective descriptive-qualitative research. After that, the result of analysis would be related back to van Leeuwen's inventory of rules (2004), whether the findings were related to or against the theory, with the further analysis and explanations on the impact towards the society. Furthermore, the inventory of rules theory also copes the

global society as a field of study, therefore it is proportionally fit to say that the theory can analyze the data without using a supporting theory.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

In analyzing the data, Leeuwen's (2004) theory on semiotics rules has been employed. In his book, this theory comprises of four sub-theory; semiotic rules, arbitrariness, double articulation, and an inventory of rules. The latter mentioned has its own supporting theory; personal authority, impersonal authority, conformity, role models. These four sub-major theories are the basics that are relied upon in analyzing the utterances of the speech.

##### 4.1 Personal authority

Personal authority, is exercised by people who: (a) are in a position of power, and (b) see no need for justifying their actions, or dictate. The rule of personal authority is always *ad hoc*, meaning that other people cannot anticipate when rules will be imposed, what they will be, or for how long they will apply. If there is any individual freedom or a difference in the substantial aspect, it is a mere privilege which must be gotten through interacting with the people being mentioned. She said:

***I want men to take up this mantle so their daughters, sisters and mothers can be free from prejudice but also so their sons have permission to be vulnerable and human, too and in doing so, be a more true and complete version of themselves.***

This utterance emphasizes the idea that the one being discriminated is female counterparts. Therefore, she calls men to step up and deal with the matter, because as far as it goes, the progress of eliminating gender discrimination is nowhere near the solution. Men, as the father, brother, or a leader in this instance are expected to be the one solving the problem to create a better social condition.

This also shows that the value that Hillary Clinton fought for to change in 1997 is still happening in the society, meaning that the thing is still happening, and it is bad. The missing idea from this sentence is that the absence of what was fought by Hillary Clinton at 1997 and yet today – assuming 2014 – is still happening in the world. Relevantly, it should not be far ahead from feminism itself.

Furthermore, she seems to suggest that the reason men aren't involved in the fight for gender equality is that women have not invited them and cause men to be unwelcomed. This is an assumptive expression, because in general, men never had any formal invitation whatsoever from feminist movement to stand for gender inequality, and yet she abruptly said about extending the welcome, in which men never received before this speech took place.

##### 4.2 Impersonal authority

Impersonal authority is divided into two forms: (a) the authority of the written word; such as Holy Scriptures of a religion, the laws of a nation, an employment contract, etc, and (b) the authority of tradition. In the case of tradition or customary law, nothing is

written down, explicitly or systematically codified. The rules are enforced by everyone, rather than by specific individuals. As she said:

*"For the record, feminism, by definition, is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. I started questioning gender-based assumptions a long time ago."*

Here, she explains the literal definition of the word 'feminism' to justify the relevance of her speech with the issue being discussed. She argues that feminism is a part of influential factor in the society, in a sense that without gender equality, the political, economic and social agendas will be severely disrupted on some points.

This is a perfect example of how Ms. Watson cannot neglect the authority which is higher than her, and makes her obey the nature of written law (Leeuwen, 2004). It is confirmed the feminism is a belief that men and women should have equal opportunities (Cambridge, 2008), without any explanation on the limitation of it. The theory that she mentioned is lacking context on where and when it can be applied, whereas it is acknowledgeable that there are certain works for instance that can only be done by men (e.g sperm bank donator) and women (breastfeeding) (Mckenzie, 2014).

#### 4.3 Conformity

Conformity looks similar with tradition, but it is significantly different. Rather than doing what the group of

people have always done, conformity is about doing 'what everybody else appears to be doing'. It know neither explicit codes, nor the the customs of how tradition occurs, and can be seen from what everyone looks to be doing, or in short, what it appears the most.

*You might think, 'Who is this Harry Potter girl? What is she doing at the U. N.?' And it's a really good question - I've been asking myself the same thing. All I know is that I care about this problem and I want to make it better.*

This utterance shows her way of addressing herself to the audience although it occurs in the near end of the speech. She greatly underlines that people should not see her as character *Hermione* to judge her anymore, in which she believed it is irrelevant considering the issue she has been discussing in the speech. She emphasizes it by saying that no matter who she is (or was), it is no more important. What matters now is that she cares to the issue, and keen to make a change to betterment.

First of all, she acknowledged that her most known representation to the society is from the role he played in the movie *Harry Potter*. From what it appears, it seems that she uses this knowledge to gain a mutual understanding that she might not be the best person to be the ambassador. However society should not judge her badly because she has a legitimate intention for the sake of betterment of the gender inequality. This idea is essential to make a justifying stance for her to be accepted by people regardless the apparent fact that she



may not have the appropriate skills and experience.

#### 4.4 Role model

Role model is a kind of social control applied through examples given by high status people in any level of community, including the media. It gives meaning and a social value to society on the resemblance of what they do.

*my life is a sheer privilege because my parents didn't love me less because I was born a daughter. My school did not limit me because I was a girl. My mentors didn't assume that I would go less far because I might give birth to a child one day.*

This utterance shows that she is thankful for the people around her, especially her parents who love her all the way although she is a girl. She sees the presence of these people to be the ones that are prominent en route to what she has become today. Moreover, she indirectly states that her life is a gift that many girls out there might not experience, and she feels blessed for it.

This sentence represents the other person acting as someone who she is fond of, an aspect which is admired, followed and exemplified (Leeuwen, 2004). She explained her fair childhood days without any discrimination of her being a girl. This sentence alone can become a proof that Ms. Watson never truly experienced how it feels to be marginalized or objectified. She had never felt how it is to be someone forced to do things, contrary to what she has been saying in the entire speech. Based on the portrayal of role

model, this idea backlashes with the purpose of her presenting the main idea of the campaign, which is being a woman who is (or was) marginalized in the society, simply because she never experienced any.

#### 5. Conclusion

The theory of social semiotics, which in this case is semiotic rules, are essential to unveil the process of meaning making of a person in authority and power to make a justification of actions (Halliday, 1978; Leeuwen, 2004). The above analysis can be summarized into several points.

First of all, Ms. Watson uses four of five theory of rules in delivering the speech, they are: personal authority, impersonal authority, conformity and role models. The data findings show that most of her sentences are from the rules of personal authority, implying mainly on showing her strength of authority to the audience. This is mostly because audience or the general society previously sees her not as an Ambassador, but an actress, making her to repeatedly adjust her stance so that society can differentiate her context in the speech.

In a response to the analysis, this speech indeed has strengths, such as its simplistic structure, her use of *pathos* and *ethos* and *logos*, and the fact that she used many desirable points and arguments. This speech also had a couple weaknesses, like the fact that she is a mere actress who doesn't have much credibility on the issue and the fact that she didn't cover many counter-arguments in her speech to make her points and arguments more believable.

As of to the current situation, the equality as what she expected is believed to be a difficult task to achieve, no matter how hard we -or they- try under the analysis. The idea of patriarchal structure is still the biggest obstacle to be beaten in the first place. Without general society to let go of this structure, equality will never take place. It may sound unfair and lucrative, but even without it, people will still be able to live in harmony without discrimination, because men and women are completing one to the other. Even though for instance gender bias or discrimination is true, it still can come from both sexes, contrary to the speech that strongly mentions it only comes from men to women. The examples that were brought are also subjective and generally sexist to begin with.

To conclude, the speech seems to act merely as a promotional campaign, rather than a wakeup call. The person advocating could have been somebody who, for instance in the past had a terrible experience of being discriminated and known to public as well, contrary to her situation albeit the truth is still intact. The speech itself is also arguably debatable and raises more questions such as the target audience she intends directing to or the fact that the term 'gender' in today's society is still highly debatable in definition. This means that she unfortunately fails to give the speech a powerful impact to those who are cynical about the feminist movement in general.

However, it is hard to argue that Emma Watson is a global star that does not need to worry about not being

known by people around the world. Her popularity is extremely influential for United Nations to promote the organizations and the idea of having equal rights for all people. To put it simply, people will pay attention to the person who has a high gravity of being in a center of lights and much of whatever she presents to public will be heard by many, and hopefully be understood as well. The UN may not have an expert advocate, but they surely have someone whom people love to see and hear, and that may be the silver lining of the speech itself.

Since the speech was given more than 5 years ago, a slight or major change on the current condition is likely to happen, therefore examining the accuracy of data in the speech is also highly relevant to be done to make a better findings in the analysis. Apart from that, knowing the fact that humans live in the world of multilingual and multicultural (Martin, 2006 and Holmes, 2005), the possibility of analyzing this object through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or semantics is highly possible and will be able to give a better insight on comprehending the speech in general.

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