**Examining the communication of female political leaders in the Global South**

Mark Nartey

University of the West of England, United Kingdom

**Abstract**

This Special Issue expands on the ongoing dialogue on the decolonial project by bringing together thought-provoking papers that examine the communication of female political leaders in the Global South. It draws on data from West Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East to elucidate how female politicians deploy language (including multimodal forms) to position themselves in the political arena and utilize linguistic resources to navigate the discursive practices associated with their political roles and responsibilities. The issue offers a critical discursive perspective on the complex interplay of gender, culture and political leadership, and holds implications for how key issues such as voice, agency, solidarity and empowerment are conceptualized and enacted in specific sociocultural contexts. It also contributes to overcoming epistemicide by decentring knowledge production and underscoring the importance of valuing and engaging with different knowledge systems, especially non-Western epistemologies.

**Keywords:** critical discourse studies, political discourse analysis, political communication, gender and identity, voice and agency, discursive strategy

1. **Introduction**

Nearly three decades after the 1995 Beijing Declaration that advanced the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of humanity, the social barriers that adversely affect women are still pervasive in many societies despite the gains that have been made in gender equality. This notwithstanding, women continue to shatter glass ceilings and disrupt dominant ideologies, resulting in an increase in the number of women serving in high-level political positions in countries throughout the world (Ahrens 2009). In the Global South, gender inequality and/or the marginalization of women is rooted in patriarchy and exacerbated by factors like poverty, sociohistorical ideologies of female subordination, cultural expectations of women, religious beliefs/practices and social customs, conventions and regulations considered normative for women (Jaggar 2002). As the normalization of women in politics is a recent phenomenon in this context and the traditional view that women in politics are ‘trespassers’ (Anderson et al. 2011) is still prevalent, we can surmise that female political leaders in the Global South will encounter more challenges than their counterparts in the Global North.

Women in the Global South are active participants in the defence of women’s rights and human rights in general despite the patriarchal obstacles that (try to) limit or delegitimate their involvement. They continue to resist all forms of inequities and injustices, promote women’s sexual and reproductive rights and demand radical changes in the political systems of their countries. Therefore, their participation in politics and other public spaces is essential in the quest to subvert gender norms and promote social transformation. This makes it necessary for scholarship on women, gender and politics to not only expose the gender gap in politics, but also echo the voice and agency of women, especially in the Global South, leading the charge for justice, equality and empowerment. Female leaders in the Global South represent individuals in diverse developing countries who are bearing the brunt of the actions and policies of developed countries in the West as evident in colonialism/neocolonialism, capitalism, the slave trade and the current climate crisis. Hence, research that highlights how female politicians in the Global South are using their leadership, influence and communicative practices to undo disparities embedded in social structures and to instigate radical change is useful to help us imagine better futures and appreciate the importance of a global perspective in addressing social injustices. Against this backdrop, the current Special Issue examines the communication of female leaders in the Global South by taking a political discourse analysis approach.

In what follows, I first provide a conceptualization of political discourse analysis and the notion of voice in critical social research to underscore the theoretical underpinning of the Special Issue. Next, I review the literature on the interplay of language, gender and politics to demonstrate the lack of studies on the political communication of female leaders in the Global South. I then argue for why political discourse analysis that transcends the Global North/Anglo-American praxis is useful to highlight alternative worldviews, different voices and diverse methodological and epistemological approaches in political discourse analysis as well as underscore the crucial role of political language in decolonization processes. After that, I provide an outline of the papers that make up the Special Issue. I conclude by synthesizing the findings of the articles in the issue as well as highlighting the implications the issue holds for reparative critical practices, the articulation and implementation of positive transformations by non-dominant groups and the function of discourse as an empowering-cum-inspiring artifact.

1. **Political discourse analysis**

Political discourse analysis (PDA) is an integral component of critical social research. With a focus on the reproduction and enactment of political power and ideology through discourse, PDA examines the strategic deployment and ‘manipulation’ of political notions and language choice for specific political effect or to achieve specific socio-political aims (van Dijk 1997). PDA focuses on all properties of a text – phonology, graphics, syntax, semantics, etc. – but, more importantly, it pays particular attention to how these properties can be politically contextualized. The main goal of PDA, Wilson (2001, 410) posits, is “to seek out the ways in which language choice is ‘manipulated’ for specific political effect”. This implies that the approach requires a balance between linguistic analysis and political analysis, a position reinforced by van Dijk (1997, 11) when he states that “PDA is both about political discourse and it is also a critical [linguistic] enterprise”. Thus, from a critical theory perspective, PDA “deals especially with the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse, including the various forms of resistance or counter-power against such forms of discursive dominance” (van Dijk 1997, 11).

Political discourse is considered a form of political action or ‘doing politics’ by text or talk. It is highly performative and is shaped by contextual issues of (dis)agreement, conflicts of interest and values, power inequalities, uncertainty and risk (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). In view of this, PDA investigates various dimensions of discourse structure to delineate the discursive mechanisms of ‘doing politics’. Key among the preferred structures and strategies used to accomplish political actions in political contexts include topics/topicalization, superstructures or textual schemata, local semantics, expression structures, lexicon and syntax, speech acts and interaction and rhetoric (van Dijk 1997). As an examination of the discourse structures related to properties of political structures and processes, PDA has an overlapping relationship with the study of political cognition, which deals with various aspects of political information processing and focuses on the acquisition, uses and structures of mental representations about political actors, events, groups and situations. As van Dijk (2002) avers, the interrelationship between political discourse and political cognition suggests that discourse and politics can be related in at least two ways. First is the socio-political level where political processes and structures are shaped by the situatedness of events, interactions and discourses of political actors in political contexts. Second is the socio-cognitive level where political representations are related to individual representations of these discourses, interactions and contexts.

A conceptualization of PDA relevant to the Special Issue is Fairclough and Fairclough’s (2012) assertion that PDA views political discourse as a form of *practical* argumentation (emphasis in the original) in which agents deliberate several possibilities, ponder reasons for and against their actions and decide how to act or position themselves in relation to others. They argue that although political discourse does not only entail argumentation, other forms of communication in politics (e.g., descriptions, explanations and narratives) typically provide premises for practical arguments since political discourse ultimately aims to influence decisions and actions. Fairclough and Fairclough propose the incorporation of tools of argument evaluation into existing normative and explanatory critiques in critical social research while contending that these tools will help analysts to criticize powerful arguments that are not easily challenged and to interrogate how people’s ideologies inform their decisions and actions. In other words, they maintain that argumentation theory is useful in discussing fundamental concepts in critical/political discourse studies such as ideology, power, dominance, hegemony, manipulation and legitimacy among others. Since the papers in this Special Issue put the spotlight on the self-construction of female leaders as they resist dominant ideologies and promote social transformation, the articles analyse and interpret the various arguments advanced by female politicians as they position themselves in political spaces, spaces which have long been described as male-dominated.

In the last two decades, PDA research has expanded considerably, with most studies situated in Western contexts and Euro-American politics as well as examining the language of prominent male politicians (cf. Charteris-Black 2005; Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). The focus on male politicians is also evident in research on the discourse of non-Western leaders (cf. Ngula 2021; Nartey 2023a). Studies on the discourse of female political leaders have begun to gain attention in the PDA literature, with this literature characterized by a Western-centric approach to Anglo-American politics (cf. Ahrens 2009; Walsh 2001). Several of these studies on gender and politics have analysed discourses about female politicians rather than their own use of language. For instance, this scholarship has examined media coverage of women politicians (Van der Pas & Aaldering 2020), gender-based violence against women in politics (Esposito & Zollo 2021), pundits’ and voters’ perception of women candidates (Corbett et al. 2021) and the depiction of women leaders in policy statements, in the press and on social media (Smith & Higgins 2020). Few studies have focused attention on the communication of female leaders in the Global South. Again, such research has centred on discourses surrounding women’s involvement in politics, especially the misogynistic abuse they suffer (Pérez-Arredondo & Graells-Garrido 2021) and their media portrayals (Anderson et al. 2011; Diabah 2022; Diabah & Agyepong 2022), rather than their own use of language in the construction of their identities and leadership. Given the above, there is scope for work on the political communication of female leaders in the Global South, especially how they construct themselves through their own discursive practices or via their own voices. It is in this direction that the Special Issue threads the needle by acknowledging and amplifying the voices of Global South female politicians and taking note of their diversity and unique circumstances.

1. **Conceptualizing ‘voice’ in critical social research**

The conceptualization of voice is significant in critical social research given its interrelationship with identity and representation as well as the implication it holds for inclusion and exclusion. It is a complex concept with multiple meanings and diverse interpretations and has individual, social, sociological and discursive aspects (Bonnin 2021). Deriving from the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986), voice has been construed in three main ways in the literature. First, it signals the viewpoint and discursive style of social actors (Wortham & Gadsden 2006). Second, it is used to describe a “series of typeable semiotic regularities that indexicalize a context and a type of social subject, thereby enabling the reconstruction of socially available representations of classes of speakers and ways of speaking” (Bonnin 2019, 234). Third, it can be understood as a socially recognizable discourse through which social actors actively construct agency by expressing emotions, making evaluations, taking stances, offering perspectives, etc. (Archakis 2014). This third conceptualization of voice is relevant to the Special Issue and implies that as an individual phenomenon, voice is rooted in social discourses and individual voices are built on social voices to perform various functions such as articulating legitimacy, engaging in polemics and indexing authority and authenticity. That is, voice can be both individual and social and the two dimensions co-exist to construct identity via a variety of voices and discourses (Bonnin 2019). Thus, the notion of voice, as Pietikainen and Dufva (2006, 206) reckon, can be “useful in mapping the meanings and significations that individuals give to their experiences onto their ways of drawing on and using socially available and conditioned discourses”.

Voice represents the distinctive position that agents have in social spaces vis-à-vis other agents (Bourdieu 1971). As a result, an individual’s voice is created by integrating the capital they build up in the social settings in which they participate and these capitals can be indexed via language use and communicative practices, including multimodal forms. It is noteworthy that voice, like discourse, is dialogic and hence must be examined in relation to other voices (Bolívar 2018) by which it creates relationships of proximity or distance, acceptance or denunciation. Hence, there is a need to “analyse the phenomenon of co-construction of this voice, individual and social at the same time, in actual conversational contexts between participants with different and discursively recognizable biographical trajectories” (Bonnin 2021, 72). The critical analysis of voice in communication is done in tandem with such notions as agency, solidarity, empowerment, (de)legitimation and identity construction. Hence, in examining the communicative practices of female leaders in the Global South, the papers in this Special Issue regard the voice of women in politics as a valuable interventionist resource needed to divest power, decentre hegemonic structures and decolonize political processes.

Female politicians in the Global South find themselves not only in a space that is dominated by men, but also in patriarchal societies where women are marginalized and their voices are silenced. The social barriers they face notwithstanding, these female leaders are at the forefront of global leadership and continue to champion the cause of justice and equity in their countries and across the world, thereby offering hope and inspiration to marginalized groups. They explore innovative and strategic ways to make their voices heard and strongly position themselves in the political arena despite their inhibiting circumstances. I therefore argue that in addition to exposing and condemning injustices and gender-based violence against women in politics, it is necessary for critical social research to centre their voices and put the spotlight on the positive identities they construct for themselves. This constitutes an important aspect of reparative critical practices required for emancipatory transformations (Macgilchrist 2016; Nartey 2023b).

1. **Language, gender and politics**

The study of language and gender can be categorized under four main theoretical paradigms. These include the ‘deficit’ model in which women’s language is characterised as been relatively less powerful than men’s language (Lakoff 1975), the dominance model in which gender differences are construed from the perspective of men’s power and women’s subordination in society (Fishman 1978; Spender 1980), the cultural difference model in which men and women are perceived as members of different subcultures and hence develop different but equally valuable communicative attributes (Maltz & Borker 1982; Tannen 1990) and the critical model made up of anti-essentialist approaches such as social constructivism and frameworks that explicate the performative nature of gender (Butler 1990) and how people ‘do’ gender as a normal feature of interactions (West & Zimmerman 1987). The papers in this Special Issue adopt a critical view of gender that takes cognizance of the construction and negotiation of gender in specific sociocultural, temporospatial and historical contexts. The papers thus illustrate new understandings of gender and its manifestations in different communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999) with respect to roles, relations, identities and representations.

The scholarship on women’s language in public contexts take as a starting point the view that men’s talk is typically competitive, argumentative and verbally aggressive while women’s talk is considered co-operative, facilitative and other-oriented (Holmes 1992; Shaw 2002). This research typically examines the relationship between gender, language and power (Tannen 1997) and argues that one of the main functions of the interactional strategies of men (e.g., challenging utterances, assertive disagreements and disruptive utterances) is to assert power and/or status while women seem less comfortable in such status- or power-oriented contexts (Holmes 1992). The findings of this body of work may not be generalized; however, the literature suggests that in some public contexts, including politics, men occupy the floor more than women and use language features associated with dominance more than women (Shaw 2002).

That is, men and women are likely to enact different discursive practices in public contexts based on their circumstances and women are often disadvantaged because institutional structures and ideologies that derive from culture, customs, conventions, religion, tradition, etc. impede their full participation in public settings. For instance, sexist ideologies, male chauvinism, gender stereotypes, misogynistic abuse and violence against women candidates are prevalent in several contemporary societies. Owing to the work of feminists, gender advocates and women’s rights organizations, women’s participation in politics in the last two decades has increased even though the gender gap is still evident. And with the expansion of the Internet, especially social media, the avenues available to female politicians for identity construction, solidarity formation, group empowerment, the enactment of agency, etc. have become diverse and sophisticated. Hence, an examination of the political communication of contemporary female leaders, as is done in the current project, is useful in shedding light on the role of language in imagining and implementing emancipatory agendas (cf. Hughes 2018; Nartey 2022).

Research on the interplay of gender, language and politics has focused largely on women because feminists, scholars in gender studies and people who work with women’s organisations have sought to reveal the gender disparity in politics and the disadvantages this poses to women. As Esposito (2022, 14) notes, “women’s active political participation is still regarded by some societal segments and in many socio-political contexts as a transgression of gendered societal norms”. To this end, the scholarship on female political leaders has focused mainly on the unequal representation of women, women as a minority group in politics and the marginalisation of and discrimination against women who stand for political office (cf. Shaw 2002). Some studies have also focused on women’s participation in political speech events and are often based on Gilligan’s (1982) supposition that female politicians use a ‘different voice’ from the language generally associated with politics as a male-dominated profession (Kathlene 1994; Nownes & Freeman 1998; Broughton & Palmieri 1999). Regarding discourses surrounding female politicians, previous research shows that language, images, symbols and other semiotic codes are exploited to exclude women as political actors. These studies, drawing on theories such as feminism, multimodality, sociolinguistics, intersectionality, critical inquiry, mediated discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics have shed light on misogyny (Esposito & Zollo 2021), xenophobia (Kopytowska 2021), activism (Alam 2021), gendered stereotypes (Rasulo 2021), sexist ideologies (Esposito & Breeze 2022), Antisemitism and Islamophobia (Kuperberg 2021) and violence against women in politics (Bardall 2018). This body of work indicates that text, talk and semiosis reflect and contribute to the (re)production and maintenance of stereotypes, hegemony and power asymmetries against female politicians; hence the need for discursive work to continue to be at the forefront of political discourse analysis.

Other studies have examined the nexus between politics, gender and conceptual metaphors and demonstrate how the metaphors used by male and female politicians can serve as an essential weapon in their arsenal given the varied rhetorical purposes of metaphor (Ahrens & Lee 2009; Koller & Semino 2009; 2009; Charteris-Black 2009). Even though some studies argue that male and female politicians use metaphors differently, other studies do not find evidence for the gendered use of metaphor in political discourse (cf. Ahrens 2009). While it is unclear in the literature the extent to which gender influences metaphor use, Lim (2009) asserts that gendered conceptual metaphors both empower and disempower women leaders. Instructively, the existing work on the relationship between politics, gender and metaphor notes that several factors, including political orientation, professional background, audience, goal, topic, and other contextual information, can account for the differences in metaphor use by male and female politicians. They also contend that metaphor can be strategically exploited by both politicians to perform masculinity or femininity depending on their socio-political goals. The extant scholarship on language, gender and politics has given little attention to the discursive practice of female leaders in the Global South; hence the need to centre such scholarship outside the Euro-American praxis. Such research, as the current Special Issue demonstrates, is useful to highlight global perspectives, different voices and methodological pluralism in political discourse analysis. This scholarship is also essential in underscoring the crucial role of political language in undoing colonial practices and ideologies.

Calls for the decolonization of (critical) discourse studies (de Melo Resende 2021a) and the decolonization of epistemologies in general have increased in recent years (de Sousa Santos 2014; Henaku & Pappoe 2022). The decolonial project aims to make a decisive intervention in knowledge systems to valorise other ways of thinking, diverse worldviews and different knowledges (Escobar 2007). It tackles issues such as colonial residue, Eurocentrism and mono-epistemicism (Macgilchrist 2014), promotes ideologies like biocentrism, plurinationalism and gender visibility (Rojas-Lizana & Dolhare 2021) and declares that “emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory” (de Sousa Santos 2014, viii). In a recent Special Issue on decolonizing critical discourse studies, Viviane de Melo Resende rightly notes that “the problem with epistemicide is not that certain intellectual production (such as Latin American, Caribbean, African or Asian thought in discourse analysis) does not exist, but that it is invisible in certain spheres” (de Melo Resende 2021a, 7). The papers in the issue (Achugar 2021; Ahmed 2021; de Melo Resende 2021b; Macedo & de Carvalho Figueiredo 2021; Maniglio & da Silva 2021; Rojas-Lizana & Dolhare 2021) demonstrate that the decolonial project while claiming the power of marginalized knowledge systems in the South does not silence other voices in the North and is necessary (not sufficient) in interrogating hegemonic structures of colonialism in Global South political discourses. I agree with de Melo Resende (2021a) that this awareness is fundamental to decolonizing (critical) discourse studies, criticizing the historical silencing of Southern epistemologies and divesting power. The current Special Issue adds to the ongoing conversation on and awareness creation about the decolonial project and epistemologies of the South within (critical) discourse studies and echoes the view that decoloniality in scholarship requires “those at the hegemonic centre a willingness to a dislocation of power; an openness to (have others) redefine expertise and rigour and to discomfort in the face of new knowledges” (Rutazibwa 2020, 240).

1. **Political discourse analysis beyond the Global North/Anglo-American praxis**

The past decade has seen an increase in the number of women serving in high-level political positions in countries in the Global South. Yet, discursive work on female political leaders in this context is scarce, a notable exception being Esposito’s (2017) work on the campaign discourse of Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the first female prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago. This lack of research on the language of female politicians from the Global South is confirmed in Randour et al.’s (2020) systematic review of studies in PDA in the last two decades. Such research is, however, important in illustrating how different women in different political and sociocultural contexts utilize language for argumentation, de/legitimation, resistance, self-promotion and identity construction. Such work will significantly contribute to decolonial research from a PDA perspective by addressing the silencing or suppression of certain knowledge systems and “[recognizing] the different ways of knowing by which people across the globe run their lives and provide meaning to their existence” (de Sousa Santos 2014, viii).

This is essential to valorize the epistemological diversity of the world and amplify issues bordering on the voice, agency and empowerment of historically marginalized groups in a context underexplored in the literature. Given that traditional perceptions of gender roles, stereotypes about women and gender inequalities are pervasive in Global South countries, it is necessary to explore how female political leaders in these countries use language to participate in the political life of their countries as well as employ various linguistic resources to negotiate the discourse practices associated with their political roles and responsibilities. For a more holistic understanding of PDA outside the Anglo-American praxis, the need for the aforementioned gap to be redressed cannot be overemphasized. This Special Issue has arisen in response to this need and demonstrates how research in language and politics can benefit from a diversity of contexts in terms of new data, new understandings of gender in PDA and different manifestations of gender and PDA in different sociocultural and spatiotemporal contexts.

The Special Issue provides a collection of cutting-edge research that examines the political communication of female leaders in Ghana, Nigeria, Chile, Barbados and Turkey, and offers a critical discursive perspective on the complex interplay of gender, identity and political leadership. The papers draw on a variety of data, including parliamentary debates, political speeches, election campaigns and social media posts, to explore how the leaders use language to achieve sociopolitical aims in the context of power inequalities, conflict of interests and values, disagreement, uncertainty and risk. The issue offers insights into how discourse can be conceived as an empowering instrument and brings the following into focus: (a) language variation in politics to reflect power and ideology, (b) political appropriation of the properties of text and talk in specific contexts, (c) construction of political and sociocultural identities on social media, (d) culturally specific linguistic trends in political discourse and (e) de/legitimation in political communication in different societies.

By focusing on the discursive strategies, argumentation schemes and linguistic mechanisms evident in the discourses produced by female political leaders in the Global South, this Special Issue extends the scope of PDA research by providing a more comprehensive understanding of this field of critical inquiry. It illustrates the importance of interdisciplinary and eclectic research frameworks and provides a basis for comparative studies from a Global South vs. Global North perspective. More importantly, as the papers in this project engage with work that transcends the traditional European and North American canon, they address what decolonial scholars have called ‘epistemicide’ (de Sousa Santos 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) and underscore the importance of valuing and engaging with different knowledge systems. Further to this point, the Special issue reiterates calls for the continued imagination of new epistemic frontiers that take ideas, insights and epistemes from the Global South seriously while opening us spaces for dialogue between the many unique contexts in the Global South and between the Global South and the Global North (Henaku & Pappoe 2022). This is necessary for the diversification and enrichment of the political discourse scholarship by building new understandings and extending existing knowledge.

The Special Issue consists of six contributions, including this introductory paper. All the papers have a critical orientation to PDA, and they employ multiple theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, including (feminist) critical discourse analysis, discourse-historical analysis, discursive legitimation, social semiotics, multimodality and strategic self-presentation. They theorize notions such as voice, agency, solidarity and empowerment and hence shed light on how these notions in Global South contexts can be similar and/or different from their instantiation in other (for example, Western) contexts. All contributions add to and extend existing work on discursive positioning, framing processes, identity construction and legitimation in political communication. The contributors are concerned with how female leaders exploit political discourse in specific spatiotemporal and sociocultural contexts to achieve aims such as solidarity formation for group empowerment, ideology valorization, identity construction, self-promotion, agenda setting and resistance. In addition to accounting for local influences, the issue demonstrates how political language can take on distinctive properties of particular transnational environments within which it is imagined, performed and construed. Furthermore, the non-Western perspective the issue takes is relevant in highlighting how unique and/or key socio-political configurations can shape language use in specific contexts and give socio-political actors an argumentative advantage in promoting their objectives.

1. **Synopsis of studies**

Carolina Pérez Arredondo, Camila Cárdenas-Neira and Luis Cárcamo-Ulloa open the issue with an exploration of the multimodal discursive strategies used by Elisa Loncón, a Mapuche linguist and renowned academic, to position herself as a social and political leader. Drawing on insights from discourse-historical analysis, social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics, the paper analyzes the Instagram posts of Loncón during her tenure as president of the Chilean Constitutional Convention. The findings reveal three themes that indicate how Loncón legitimize her leadership and foreground her Mapuche ancestry: the construction of an alternative leadership, visibilization of female leadership decision-making and vindication of linguistic rights. Arredondo et al.’s paper is one of the few studies to examine the language of an indigenous female leader in politics. Hence, their study significantly contributes to the limited scholarship on the voice and agency of oppressed groups and illuminates the instrumentality of political communication as an empowering artifact. Methodologically, their paper also highlights the importance of a semiotic and multimodal approach to social media data in unpacking the multifaceted, multimodal discursive events of Web 2.0 (cf. Esposito 2022).

The second contribution by Mark Nartey examines the discursive construction of agency by Mia Mottley, the Barbadian prime minister. He finds that Mottley frames her agency by constructing strong and decisive leadership, sculpting a ‘prophetess’ image and issuing a clarion call to action. These mechanisms enable her to project her voice, move issues concerning the development of Barbados (and by extension other developing countries) from the margin to the center and establish her political legitimacy and authority. Nartey’s paper illustrates how the strategies of political communication enable politicians to sculpt images that align with their goals in order to project their voice and agency as well as authorize their worldview. Generally, there are few studies in PDA research that highlight the agency of female leaders and women in general and most studies have been conducted in Western contexts. Nartey’s paper therefore extends existing work on discursive agency in political communication, centers issues that border on the voice and empowerment of female leaders and reinforces the view that research on female agency is important in dismantling repressive patriarchal structures and building inclusive communities.

Informed by the view that the affordances of social media enable women to center their voice, Ebuka Elias Igwebuike and Lily Chimuanya’s article investigates how Nigerian female political leaders exploit self-presentation strategies to formulate and promote social justice, thereby positioning themselves as powerful and credible leaders. Their study analyzes data collected from the Twitter and Facebook accounts of female ministers and senators and finds that the leaders utilize self-promotion, ingratiation, exemplification, intimidation and supplication to present themselves as a powerful voice for the voiceless and as active alternative leaders. These strategies portray the leaders as dynamic participants in political and public decision-making processes and positively evaluate their contributions to positive change. Igwebuike and Chimuanya’s paper offers insights into how female politicians leverage social media platforms to position themselves as authorities despite the challenge to legitimize themselves in the political sphere and in public spaces in general.

The next paper by Kwabena Sarfo Sarfo-Kantankah, Richmond Sadick Ngula and Mark Nartey investigates how Ghanaian female members of parliament construct solidarity by positioning themselves as agents and the voice of (Ghanaian) women. It addresses a gap in the literature in terms of the paucity of studies on the voice of non-dominant groups, including their solidarity formation for group empowerment. The findings show that to enact solidarity, the members of parliament use a collectivization mechanism to cast themselves and (Ghanaian) women in the mold of instigators of social transformation. They also depict (Ghanaian) women as the backbone of society, applaud (Ghanaian) women for their achievements and contributions to national development and resist discriminatory discourses against (Ghanaian) women. The study furthermore reveals that in their solidarity construction, the members of parliament sometimes construct a reversal discourse that (inadvertently) promotes gender imbalance in favor of women. That is, their communication implies that it should be acceptable for men to be at the receiving end of gender imbalance. Consequently, the paper raises critical awareness about the possibility for gender activism to (unconsciously) promote hegemonic femininity and the need for feminist organizations to take cognizance of this. By exploring how Ghanaian female members of parliament attempt to remake gender relations, Sarfo-Kantankah et al.’s article contributes to the growing scholarship on reparative critical practices (cf. Macgilchrist 2016; Nartey 2021) and holds theoretical implications for the conceptualization of critique in critical inquiry.

The final contribution by Meral Ugur-Cinar and Fatma Yol examines the legitimation strategies used by Turkish female deputies during the headscarf debate. It analyzes the debates of deputies of varied political and/or ideological persuasions to show how they formulate women’s rights and exploit legitimation strategies to authenticate their policy position. Their analysis establishes that the legitimation strategies used by the deputies achieve a two-fold purpose of justifying arguments for or against the use of headscarves in the public sector and embedding the headscarf debate into their broader political objectives in a polarized political setting. Ugur-Cinar and Yol’s study demonstrates how legitimation strategies can be varied to suit ideological positions, thereby giving an indication of how political discourse can be shaped by intracultural dynamics.

1. **Conclusion**

This Special Issue examines how female political leaders from the Global South deploy language (including multimodal forms) to position themselves in the political arena and utilize linguistic resources to navigate the discursive practices associated with their political roles and responsibilities. It offers a critical discursive perspective on the complex interplay of gender, identity and political leadership, and illustrates how issues such as voice, agency, solidarity and empowerment are conceptualized and enacted in specific sociocultural contexts. As shown in Nartey’s paper and Igwebuike and Chimuanya’s article, the enactment of agency enables female leaders to present themselves as dynamic participants in political and public decision-making processes and positively evaluate their contributions to social change. Their construction of agency also allows them to position themselves as authentic leaders whose knowledge and expertise are essential in tackling social inequalities. Given dominant ideologies that (seek to) undermine the credibility of women in politics, this Special Issue demonstrates that scholarly work that foregrounds female agency is important in dismantling repressive patriarchal structures and building inclusive communities that are free from the trammels of social injustices. Women in politics continue to face both formal and informal barriers to their participation. Hence, by projecting female political leaders and women in general as transformative agents of change and empowerment, the female politicians centered in the various papers in this Special Issue can be said to be engaged in an emancipatory discourse aimed at promoting social transformation and opening up unrestricted possibilities for both women and men as human beings (Lazar 2007; Nartey 2023b).

The findings also demonstrate that the female leaders establish their political legitimacy and amplify their authority via multimodal discursive strategies. By so doing, they validate their identities and positions in both formal (e.g., parliament) and informal (e.g., social media) contexts. This contributes to the visibilization of female leadership and highlights how female political leaders (and their intersecting identities) purposefully deploy their communicative practices to resist sexism and racism (cf. Arredondo et al., Sarfo-Kantankah et al. and Ugur-Cinar & Yol’s paper). Therefore, this Special Issue illustrates the role of discourse as an empowering artifact as well as the role of language and female political leaders in the decolonization of political processes. It underlines the importance of centering women’s voices, decentering dominant ideologies and divesting power. All the papers in the issue note that although the language of the female politicians in the Global South analyzed bears semblance with the discourses of politicians across the globe, it is also different from these discourses as the language of the female politicians in the Global South is informed by their peculiar sociocultural and spatiotemporal contexts and shaped by the interplay of gender, identity construction and political leadership. Therefore, their communication is characterized by the general features of political discourse, but they also draw on cultural tropes and language features characteristic of local audiences. This indicates their tactfulness in articulating issues that border on the voice, agency, solidarity and empowerment of women and lends credence to the appropriation of the properties of text and talk in specific contexts. As Bhatia (2020) asserts, political communication can be most persuasively narrativized when it capitalizes on local sentiment and language features representative of local communities and audiences. Consequently, this Special Issue sheds light on culture-specific linguistic trends in political discourse and highlights how culture-specific politics shapes language and how, in turn, language shapes local politics.

Research on women in politics has largely focused attention on discourses *about* women rather than discourses *by* women and has exposed the use of language, images and other symbols to denigrate women as political actors. Consequently, studies that examine the voice, agency and positive identity construction of female politicians has received little attention in the PDA scholarship and where such studies exist, the overwhelming focus is on female leaders in Western contexts. This Special Issue recognizes that it is necessary for research in PDA to continue to deconstruct gender-based discrimination, in all its forms, against women in politics, more so when “women’s active political participation is still regarded by some societal segments and in many socio-political contexts as a transgression of gendered societal norms” (Esposito 2022, 14). That said, the issue also contends that there is a need for more work that emphasizes the voice and agency of female politicians from their own perspective, and this is especially important in Global South contexts where the marginalization of women is widespread. Such research will highlight how positive transformations can be implemented and how political discourse can function as an empowering artifact. The issue thus underscores reparative critical practices and advances understanding of “possibilities for transformations capable of enhancing human flourishing and mitigating social ills” (Hughes 2018, 199).

Just as the vilification of women in politics is accomplished through text and talk, their power, positive identity and political legitimacy can be projected in discourse. Hence, I submit that as applied linguists and (political) discourse analysts, we must shed light on how female politicians position themselves as agentive, project their voice and present themselves as proponents of social change in addition to exposing the exclusionist or prejudiced discourses directed at them. By so doing, our research will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the discourses surrounding women in politics by exposing and criticizing the gendered nature of politics as an institution as well as amplifying the discursive processes by which female leaders overcome this inequity/injustice. While the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action regards the active political participation of women as a key focus in global development policy, I daresay that academics can contribute to this objective by expounding the language utilized by female political leaders to position themselves in the political arena and navigate the discursive practices associated with their political roles and responsibilities despite the societal and structural challenges they face.

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**Address for correspondence**

Mark Nartey

2S303, School of Arts

University of the West of England

Frenchay Campus

Coldharbour Ln, Bristol BS16 1QY

United Kingdom

narteynartey60@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8386-6616

**Biographical note**

**Mark Nartey** is Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the School of Arts, University of the West of England. He is an interdisciplinary scholar who investigates semiotic phenomena at the intersection of language, culture and society. He has published extensively in applied linguistics, discourse analysis and communication/media studies. The titles of his recent books are *Political Mythmaking, Nationalist Resistance and Populist Performance* (2023) and *Communicative Perspectives on COVID-19 in Ghana* (2024), both published by Routledge.