Lingue e Linguaggi
Lingue Linguaggi 28 (2018), 211-225
ISSN 2239-0367, e-ISSN 2239-0359
DOI 10.1285/i22390359v28p211
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MERGING THE FEMALE INTO THE MALE IN THE LANGUAGE OF VIRGINIA WOOLF AND JAMES JOYCE
The Case of *The Waves* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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Abstract – This article explores the suggestion made by some scholars and researchers according to whom it is more appropriate to speak of gender-preferential rather than of gender exclusive features in the use women and men make of language, since members of both sexes are endowed with the same neuro-cognitive apparatus to acquire it. By comparing passages from two modernist novels, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the article discusses whether and how features usually associated with female authors may merge with those preferentially associated with male ones.

Keywords: acquisition; gender; Modernism; semiotic language; Linguistics.

1. Introduction

Differences between the way women and men speak and write had appeared in various text-types (newspapers, journals, poems, plays and so on) long before becoming an object of academic research at the beginning of the past century. In the early 1900s, in fact, during the emergence of the first wave of feminist criticism, Virginia Woolf laid claim to a genuine female sentence capable of expressing the experiences and emotions women felt but which, in her view, the masculine sentence failed to capture. Some years later, the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1922), partly by quoting from previous works and partly by drawing on his own intuitions, argued that women speak differently from men in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and style. Then, starting from the second wave of feminist criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, a wealth of scholarly studies (among others Bradley 1988; Cameron 1998, 2007; Coates 1986; Holmes, Meyerhoff 2003; Labov 1966; Mulac *et al.* 2013; Speer 2005; Spender 1980; Sunderland 2006; Tannen 1990; Wheaterall 2002) have investigated differences between women's and men's way of speaking and writing by examining a series of discourse-related issues like participants' role in conversation, power imbalance, group membership and cultural preferences.

Such studies, as well as others on gender differences in language use (Kristeva 1986a, 1986b; McConnell-Ginet 1980, 1986; Philips *et al.* 1987; Showalter 1981; Xiufang 2013), have shown that these are due to socio-cultural factors rather than to distinct neurobiological functions (Baxter *et al.* 2003; Burman *et al.* 2008; Clements *et al.* 2006; Harrington, Farias 2008). To add to this, the latter studies only refer to the way the two sexes respond to specific tasks (word recognition tests, reading skill tests, reading speed tests, morphological competence tests, etc.), not to how they acquire language or how they come to possess the knowledge of the system of rules they possess. Also, to state that one sex shows preferences for certain lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological features does not mean that the same features are not accessible to the other sex

(Rühlemann 2010; see section 2). There are, indeed, situations when patterns usually associated with female discourse may surface in the male one. This may happen, for example, during those states of mind which Julia Kristeva (1986a, 1986b) defines as *semiotic*. In such states the pre-linguistic, "blurred", "fluctuating", "babbling" of childhood[1] linked to the maternal body temporarily re-emerges, suppressing the stability of adult male language.

The goal of this article is to examine whether features characterizing female discourse may surface in the male one and, in case they do, which features are shared. To this end, passages from two novels of the modernist period are explored: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* both rich in passages evoking the flowing, melodic rhythm typical of semiotic language. The article is organized as follows. In section 2, first a survey is given of works which have investigated preferences in female and male discourse, and then an investigation is carried out to see whether the latter also shape the narrative texts of *The Waves* and *A Portrait* when the semiotic language emerges in moments of strain and pressure. In Section 3, excerpts from the two novels are compared more in depth to discuss the extent to which the phonological, syntactic and lexical patterns of the semiotic language illustrated in Section 2 are similarly used by female and male characters. Finally, in Section 4 conclusions are drawn.

2. Lexical and syntactic preferences in female and male language use

This section presents an overview of works which, starting from the 1970s, have analyzed differences between male and female discourse. It leaves aside general themes like gender construction and ideology, masculinity, sexism and other theoretical issues within mainstream gender studies and focuses instead on the experimental studies which have analyzed a wide range of written and spoken texts. The findings the latter report deal with the bottom-up processes (Bucholtz 1996, 1999) women and men use to produce texts, rather than the top-down strategies they use to interpret them. The works quoted do not specifically refer to the language of literature but to argumentative text-types, both formal and informal, that range from academic writings to everyday conversations. The overview is divided into three parts: List A groups studies which have highlighted women's preferences, while List B those which have focused on men's ones. Finally, List C presents studies which argue that differences do not hold, the language system being the same for both. Interestingly, the studies which have highlighted the differences between the two genders greatly exceed those which hold that these are not sharp. This is probably due to the fact that the latter have looked at language as a system of abstract rules equally accessible to both sexes, rather than as a means to create gender identities and roles.

List A includes studies showing the features primarily associated with women's way of writing and speaking, namely:

[1] Kristeva (1986a, 1986b) distinguishes between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* modality. The former is developed during the "'mirror stage" (Lacan 1953), the pre-oedipal phase in which the child identifies with the maternal body. The language he/she produces in this phase is a pre-linguistic one, made up of sounds, rhythms and intonations which do not have fixed meanings. The latter modality develops after suppressing the" mirror stage", when the role of the father comes into play and the child stabilizes his/her identity. In such a phase, the linguistic sign acquires the conventional meanings of adult language.

- tag questions, color words, euphemisms, hedges, positive evaluative adjectives, polite expressions and indirect requests (Lakoff 1975);
- expressions meant to elicit responses to keep the conversation going (Fishman 1983);
- concentration on meta-messages, that is, on what is implied rather than on what is explicitly said (Tannen 1986);
- proper nouns, terms relevant to family relationships (i.e. sister, mother, brother, etc.), precise color adjectives and words which express feelings and emotions (Rayson *et al.* 1997);
- words related to psychological and social processes (Newman *et al.* 2008);
- phrases which communicate relative uncertainty through modals (Mulac *et al.* 1990; Thomas, Murachver 2001);
- first person plural pronouns which create group-identity (Hartman 1979; Lundell 1994; Poole 1979);
- intensive adverbs, conjunctions, modals and auxiliaries for expressing tentativeness (Biber *et al.* 1998; Mehl, Pennebaker 2003);
- prestigious expressions (Eckert 1997; Maltz, Borker 1982; Poole 1999);
- innovative, creative grammar constructions.

List B includes studies that have pointed out what linguistic features and strategies men tend to use:

- directives in the form of bald imperatives rather than weaker forms (Godwin 1980);
- language to create dominance hierarchies (Maltz, Borker 1982);
- words associated with object properties and impersonal topics (Rayson *et al.* 1997);
- expressions of anger and swear words (Mehl, Pennebaker 2003);
- polysyllabic words (Eckert 1997);
- articles and deictic expressions for referring to location (Maltz, Borker 1982; Poole 1999);
- taboo words (Mulac *et al.* 2000).

More recent studies, however, those included in List C, have objected to the sharp division above by arguing that differences between men's and women's way of talking and writing are not so clear-cut because:

- both genders use the same language, differences lying only in the themes and topics they chose for discussion (Kristeva 1986a);
- both express feelings and emotions using the same words, their choices being context-dependent (Mulac *et al.* 2000);
- both resort to similar negative adjectives in evaluating written academic papers (Römer 2006);
- a "binary" division between "male vs female" discourse in linguistic conventions is not tenable (Römer 2006);
- language is "in a flux", to the extent that features associated with female discourse may "take inroads" into male discourse (Rühlemann 2010).

The view of a "non-binary" language "fluctuating" between the two genders, as suggested by Rühleman (2010) and Römer (2006), is also found in various studies on *The Waves* and *A Portrait*, the language of which lacks fixed referents in terms of female vs male voices. Taylor (2006, p. 71), for example, holds that in Virginia Woolf's novel the emotional

flavour it conveys is equally emanated by the male and the female characters.[2] This happens because, as Kitsi-Mitakou (1997, p. 74) maintains, the author is capable of capturing the "fluidity of women's body", both in female and male characters, who thus perceive themselves as a vehicle for projecting a myriad of other identities beyond their own (Miko 1988).

In James Joyce's novel, similar fluctuations between genders occur whenever, as Lawrence (2012, p. 5) notices, the "mother's body" bursts out as "fatherhood", merging female and male impulses. French (1982, p. 250) observes that Stephen Dedalus exploits such impulses to "dramatize" the intensity of his impassioned drives which, as Wawrzycka and Corcoran (1997, p. 4) as well as Milesi (2003)[3] add, fill in the novel with a "semiotic", "heterosexual scent". The feminine and masculine[4] impulses which blend in Stephen are whispered through the flowing, melodic rhythm of the semiotic language which takes shape, both in the text of *The Waves* and in that of *A Portrait*, through the exploitation of fricative and liquid consonants, questions forms, repetitions both of words and syntactic structures, first person pronouns with no specific reference and, finally, tentative expressions (e.g. epistemic modals, adverbials related to probability). It is a language full of "replications and new creations" (Hild 1994, p. 75), which gives voice to the characters' sensations of living in the midst of an uninterrupted flux incessantly falling and rising, as the passages below from *A Portrait* and *The Waves* show (*italics mine*):

> He would *fall*. He had not yet *fallen* but he would *fall* silently, in an instant. Not to *fall* was too hard, too hard; and he felt the silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come, *falling, falling*, but not yet f*allen*, still *unfallen*, but about to *fall*. (*A Portrait*, p. 175).

> Words that have lain dormant now *lift*, now *toss* their crests, and *fall* and *rise*, and *fall* and *rise* again. I am a poet, yes. Surely, I am a great poet. Boats and youth passing and distant trees, "the *falling* fountains of the pendant trees". (*The Waves,* p. 66)

It is an un-gendered language, similarly used by female and male characters. It is no coincidence, then, that in *A Portrait* Stephen often shifts from a male "'penitent" to a "feminized" soul (Brivic 2002, p. 457), an opposition which reminds us of that between the mind and the body and which strongly bursts forth in his reaction to the Eucharist:

> This idea of surrender had a perilous attraction for his mind ... He seemed to feel a flood slowly advancing towards his naked feet and to be waiting for the first faint timid noiseless wavelet to touch his fevered skin. Then, almost at the instant of that touch, almost at the verge of sinful consent, he found himself standing far away from the flood upon a dry shore, saved by a sudden act of the will or a sudden ejaculation; and, seeing the silver line of the flood far away and beginning again its slow advance towards his feet, a new thrill of power and satisfaction shook his soul to know that he had not yielded nor undone all. (*A Portrait,* p. 165)

The repetition of the word "flood" and verb phrases in the continuous tense, as well as the prevalence of fricative sounds (/f/, /s/) over others, reveal the intensity of Stephen's

[2] Taylor (2006) also argues that such a passage is easier for men since they can shift without problems between the mirror stage (Lacan 1953) and the symbolic one, while women, having made a great effort to suppress the former, find it more difficult to undertake the shift between the two stages.

[3] But see Marcus (1987) for a different interpretation on this issue.

[4] The terms "feminine" and "masculine" define the way we look at the world and experience it through categories that our Western civilization has coded either as the former or the latter. Both are cultural constructions learnt through education and upbringing (see Pyckett 1995). The terms "female" and "male", instead, refer to the biological differences living beings are born with.

"feminine" emotions, which he tries to resist by clinging to his "masculine" determination not to surrender to them. It is the symbolic, male language trying to suppress the semiotic, female one. Bernard undergoes the same struggle in *The Waves* when he wonders whether he is a man or a woman, a single character or the sum of all the other characters:

> For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda—so strange is the contact of one with another. (*The Waves*, p. 234)

The tie between mind and body, the feminine and the masculine, is central in *The Waves***,** where the "luminous halo" which suffuses the "feminine territory" can be fully experienced only through their blending:

> I do not temper my beauty with meanness lest it should scorch me. I gulp it down entire. It is made of flesh; it is made of stuff. My imagination is the body's. Its visions are not fine-spun and white with purity like Louis. (*The Waves*, p. 105)

There is a difference, though, as regards the way such a fusion of identities and genders is perceived in the two novels. While in Virginia Woolf's work the characters totally surrender to these "replications and new creations", in *A Portrait* Stephen tries to escape from them in order to master the "dominant", stable language of the symbolic stage (Deane 1992, p. xxxix):

> Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? Or was it that, being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind, he drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of a language many-coloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose? (*A Portrait*, p. 180)

Repetitions and reiterations, on the other hand, are typical features of the semiotic language in which syllables and words, by taking on a melodic contour, yield no precise meaning but a sort of litany or "'carnivalized liturgy", as Julia Kristeva (1988, p. 170) calls it, full of rituals and formulaic patterns. As already pointed out, it is a language evoking the babbling of the child, in which rhythm and tone of voice overpower the meaning words convey (Crystal 1987, p. 237). In Modernist literature, such features were considered "feminine", in opposition to those considered "masculine', like linearity, consistency and a unitary point of view (Pykett 1995, p. 12). Probably, it is not by chance that, as Milesi (2003, p. 5) suggests, the incipit of *A Portrait* starts with a fable - a genre associated with children - which Stephen's father used to tell him.

The semiotic language, then, is the mode of expression through which the characters, independently from their gender, can express their doubts and uncertainty, as Neville does in *The Waves*:

> There is always somebody, when we come together, and the edges of meeting are still sharp, who refuses to be submerged: whose identity therefore one wishes to make crouch beneath one's own. For me now, it is Susan. (*The Waves*, p. 177)

Bernard does the same, with his repeated questions in the attempt to find an identity which he finds unstable:

> Who am I? I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? ... There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, 'I Am you'. (p. 241)

Similarly, Susan uses the first person pronoun referring to a multiplicity of voices, both human and natural:

> But who am I, who lean on this gate and watch my setter nose in a circle? I think sometimes ... I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the season, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn. (p. 79)

Finally, Rhoda who, with her repetitions of the same syntactic construction (e.g."Identity failed me"/"We are nothing"; "I was blown"/"I was wafted"; "I pushed my foot"/"I laid my hand") gives her dilemmas a firmer ground to hold on to:

> Identity failed me. We are nothing. I was blown like a feather, I was wafted down tunnels. Then, very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hand against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of puddle. There is life, then, to which I am committed. (p. 50)

Similar features also appear in the language of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait*. Notice, for example, in the passage below the repetition of the same words ("the breath"/the poor breath"; "glimmering and trembling, trembling"; "wave/wave; "leaf/leaf"; help"/"help"); that of the same syntactic constructions ("the film of death"/the bright centres of the brain"/the last sweat"/"the speech thickening ..."); the flowing rhythm evoked by the use of the progressive tense and the same question form ("A world, a glimmer or a flower?") as those used by Neville, Susan, Bernard and Rhoda in *The Waves*:

> He felt the death chill touch the extremities and creep onward towards the heart, the film of death veiling the eyes, the bright centres of the brain extinguished one by one like lamps, the last sweat oozing upon the skin, the powerlessness of the dying limbs, the speech thickening and wandering and failing, the heart throbbing faintly and more faintly, all but vanquished, the breath, the poor breath, the poor helpless human spirit, sobbing and sighing, gurgling and rattling in the throat. No help! No help! (*A Portrait*, p. 120)

The same patterns filter in the passage below:

> His soul was swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings. A world, a glimmer or a flower? Glimmering and trembling, trembling and unfolding, a breaking light, an opening flower, it spread in endless succession to itself, breaking in full crimson and unfolding and fading to palest rose, leaf by leaf and wave of light by wave of light, flooding all the heavens with its soft flushes, every flush deeper than the other. (*A Portrait*, p. 187)

To conclude, the language of Joyce and Woolf is characterized by a musical, fluid rhythm distinctive of the semiotic language; a language reminiscent of the babbling of childhood but which re-emerges, both in female and male characters, during moments of stress, anxiety or deep insight. In the next section, I will examine again some of the features already tackled in this section (e.g. repetition of words and syntactic structures; sound patterns) and will explore new ones, like lexical items related to water and fluidity and verb phrases with no intrinsic endpoint (e.g. atelic verbs), which reinforce the idea of life as an uninterrupted flux. The aim is to show that, when the characters of *The Waves* and Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait* undergo moments of intense emotional stress, the language which gives voice to their sensations is one which crosses the barrier between genders.

3. Semiotic language at work: sounds, rhythmic patterns, temporal indeterminacy and lexical choices in *The Waves* and in *A Portrait*

To start from *The Waves*, the idea of fluctuation and lack of stability in life and in self-identity is a recurring motif. Below is Jinny, one of the speaking voices, reflecting on her bodily sensations:

> The torments, the divisions of your lives have been solved for me night after night, sometimes only by the touch of a finger under the table-cloth as we sat dining - so fluid has my body become, forming even at the touch of a finger into one full drop, which fills itself, which quivers, which flashes, which falls in ecstasy[5]. (*The Waves*, p. 184)

Virginia Woolf expresses what Jinny experiences through a variety of noun and verb phrases rich in as much liquid (/l/) and fricative (/v/, /f/, /s/) sounds which evoke the rhythm of life. Also, to capture the character's sensations of being melted into the surrounding reality, she favours verbs ("fills", "quivers", "flashes", "falls") over nouns – a feature associated with female language (Rayson *et al.* 1997) – to render the state of confusion overpowering Jinny as accurately as possible. In the excerpt above, most of the verbs perform unbounded activities in the habitual present with no clear end point. The effect they produce is both to make each part of the process they describe the same as the whole (Vendler 1957, p.149) and to turn the time of the action into a state of uncertainty. Similar sensations are felt by Bernard, the story-maker of the novel, whose language, rich in liquid (r/, /l/) and fricative sounds (/f/;/s/;/v/), conveys the same feeling of bewilderment as Jinny's:

> There is the old brute, too, the savage, the hairy man who dabbles his fingers in ropes of entrails; and gobbles and belches; whose speech is guttural, visceral – well, he is here. He squats in me. Tonight he has been feasted on quails, salad, and sweetbread. (p. 241)

The verbs in the passage above area telic in terms of lexical aspect and, as in the previous passage, they do not have an intrinsic end point. Like Jinny's language, Bernard's presents a variety of verbs in the habitual present which reveal his sense of bafflement about his identity: "dabbles", "gobbles", "belches", "squats". Even though dynamic, these verbs are unbounded in time[6], enclosing Bernard's experience within a mental space where each single moment of his actions and thoughts remains frozen in time, not having a final conclusion. Examples like the ones above proliferate in *The Waves* and are not specific

[5] The interpretation of the phrase "falls in ecstasy" in terms of unbounded vs bounded events is not unproblematic. The former type of events does not express an intrinsic endpoint while the latter does. My interpretation, however, in the case of the phrase "falls in ecstasy" is that the verb "falls" is atelic, and thus with no endpoint, since it selects a non-quantity DP (Borer 2005) like "ecstasy" as an argument. Compare it, for example, with the event described by the same verb in "John fell in three minutes of ecstasy", where by selecting the quantitative DP "three minutes of ecstasy" it takes on a telic role.

[6] All these verbs are atelic since they are not followed by a determiner phrase expressing measurable quantity.

only to Jinny and Bernard but to all the characters of the novel, both the female and the male ones. Below is Neville speaking:

> to myself I am immeasurable; a net whose fibres pass imperceptibly beneath the world. My net is almost indistinguishable from that which it surrounds. It lifts whales – huge leviathans and white jellies, what is amorphous and wandering; I detect, I perceive. Beneath my eyes opens – a book; I see to the bottom; the heart – I see the depths. I know what loves are trembling into fire; how jealousy shoots its green flashes hither and thither; how intricately love crosses love; love makes knots; love brutally tears them apart. I have been knotted; I have been torn apart. (p. 179)

Also in the case of Neville, Virginia Woolf conveys the idea of fluctuation by resorting to the same richness in liquid sounds (/l/, /r/), the same use of the habitual present ("lifts", "detect", "perceive", "see", "know", "shoots", "crosses", "makes") and the same repetition of similar syntactic patterns. Neville's emotional and mental turmoil is reinforced by the alternation between telic ("lifts", "see", "makes") and atelic ("detect", "perceive", "tears") verbs, which fuse together bounded and unbounded events. Neville perceives his identity as a "net" entrapped in the larger net of the surrounding reality and the other way round.

A sense bewilderment and confusion also overcomes Susan:

> But who am I?, who lean on this gate and watch my setter nose in a circle? I think sometimes … I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn. I cannot be tossed about, or float gently, or mix with other people. Yet now, leaning here till the gate prints my arm, I feel the weight that has formed itself in my side. (p. 79)

The liquid consonants which appear in her language, the prevalence of the habitual present over other tenses, the repetition of phrases of various kind like PPs ("on this ground"; "on this gate"), DPs ("the mud"; "the mist"; "the ground"), VPs ("lean"; "float"; "mix") highlight an intense state of strain. Susan tries to lessen her sense of confusion by circumscribing her thoughts to a spatio-temporal frame filled in with easily recognizable objects and entities, identified through the use of proper nouns ("January", "May", "November"), action VPs ("lean", "falls", "float", " mix") which select complement NPs modified by proximal deictic expressions ("this gate", "this ground") and the definite article ("the mud", "the mist", "the down"). Such a state of mind is so pervading in *The Waves* that even Percival, the character with the most stable identity, can't escape from it:

> "What a litter", he reflects, "what a confusion; with here birth, here death; succulence and sweetness; effort and anguish; and myself always running hither and thither" (*The Waves,* p. 61).

Of course, one may object that the characters of *The Waves*, regardless of their sex, share female features because they are the product of the imagination of a woman writer who makes them speak through lexical and syntactic items typical of the language of her gender. Yet, also James Joyce in *A Portrait* employs similar features to express Stephen Dedalus's perceptions of what appears to him contradictory, ambiguous or undefined in his attitude towards his country, his religion, his family, women and art:

> The leprous company of his sins closed about him, breathing upon him, bending over him from all sides …. He desired till his frame shook under the strain of his desire and until the senses of his soul closed. They closed for an instant and then opened. He saw. (*A Portrait,* p. 148)

In Stephen the path towards self-knowledge develops through a *logo-centrism* in which, as Hélène Cixous (1980, p. 91) suggests, any reflection, any thought, any concept is elaborated without a clear identity in terms of the dichotomy man vs woman. This may explain why Joyce's language in *A Portrait* appears rich in features associated with female discourse similar to the ones Virginia Woolf employs in *The Waves*. Consider, for instance, Stephen's inner thoughts in the passage below:

> He wanted to be held firmly in her arms, to be caressed slowly, slowly, slowly. In her arms he felt that he had suddenly become strong and fearless and sure of himself [...] He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips. (p. 107)

His language abounds in liquid (/l/, /r/) and fricative (/h/, /s/, /f/, //) sounds which reproduce almost physically the rustle of his shifting sensations, which appear too elusive to be caught. Even more so, Joyce uses a variety of phrases and repetitions (VPs: "to be held", "to be caressed"; AdvPs: "slowly", "slowly; AdjPs: "strong", "fearless", "sure", "parting"), similar to those used by Virginia Woolf, to convey as precisely as possible the contours of Stephen's disorientation. Indeed, the latter is emotionally so intense, so embracing and diffuse to be expressed in a language made up of words or phrases associated with unfocused referents. Conversely, he needs to refine the words he uses to elicit wider and wider associations ("radiant"; "warm"; "odorous"; "lavish-limbed"/"enfolded him like ...; "enfolded him like"/"like a cloud of vapour"; "like waters") so as to capture each single shade of his bafflement. Notice, in the passage below, the use of the preposition "like" and that of words evoking the idea of water and flux ("liquid", "waters", "flowed", "circumfluent"):

> Her nakedness yielded to him, radiant, warm, odorous, and lavish-limbed, enfolded him like a shining cloud, enfolded him like water with a liquid life: and like a cloud of vapour or like waters circumfluent in space the liquid letters of speech, symbols of the element of mystery, flowed forth over his brain. (p. 242)

Stephen's "spiritual" crisis and his sense of disorientation mirror an acute emotional state in which all his senses fuse into each other, generating a complex net of associations which entraps him. It is pure semiotic language, rich in alliteration, repetitions and characterized by a distinct rhythmic pattern similar to that found in *The Waves*.

As a matter of fact, in *A Portrait* other semiotic moments emerge when Stephen reflects on the dichotomy sin vs forgiveness which affects his attitude towards the opposite sex. Women are associated with both terms of the dichotomy.

> He heard what her eyes said to him from beneath their cowl and knew that in some dim past, whether in life or reverie, he had heard their tale before. He saw her urge her vanities, her fine dress and sash and long black stockings, and knew that he had yielded to them a thousand times. Yes a voice within spoke above the noise of his dancing heart, asking him would he take her gift to which he had only to stretch out his hand. (p. 116)

Notice again the massive use of liquid and fricative consonants as well as the repeated use of coordinate clauses generated by parallel structures ("her fine dress", "and sash", "and long black stockings", "and knew ..."), which reveal that Stephen is striving for a coherent image of Emma. Yet, the coherence in syntax, with its stable grammar rules associated with the symbolic modality, is effaced by the semiotic language with its flowing rhythm. Stephen's sensations shift from hearing, through eyesight**,** to touch: the eyes which hear,

the voice that takes on the role of the seducer and the transition between conscious states and unconscious ones. Stephen, like Bernard, Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, Percival in *The Waves* is immersed in a myriad of fluctuating sensations too powerful to be fully apprehended in a single moment. In fact, various studies (Attridge 2000, 2003; Beer 1992; Deane 1992; Hild 1994; Sukanya 2012) on Woolf and Joyce have argued that rhythm, melody and fluidity are tools Stephen and the six characters of *The Waves* use to experience a sort of "mystical state" (Kristeva 1986b, p. 135) in which they can find shelter from a life perceived as elusive and fleeting. The effect such a rhythm produces on the texture of the two novels is strengthened by the use of the specific lexical and phonological choices the authors make. Observe again, in the passages below from *A Portrait*, the occurrence of the word "waves" and others associated with it, as well as that of fricative and liquid consonants which evoke the idea of fluidity (my italics in all the excerpts):

> The fire *r*ose and *f*ell on the wa*ll*. It was like *waves*. Someone had put coa*l* on and he *h*eard *v*oices. They were ta*l*king. It was the noise of the *waves*. Or the *waves* were ta*l*king among themsel*v*es as they *r*ose and *f*ell. (*A Portrait,* p. 25)

> Evening *h*ad fa*ll*en. A *r*im of the young moon c*l*eft the pa*l*e waste of sky*li*ne, the *r*im of a si*l*ver hoop embedded in g*r*ey *s*and; and the *tide* was *flowing* in fast to the land with a *l*ow whispe*r* of her *wave*s, is*l*anding a few *l*ast figures in distant *pools*. (p. 178)

or the ones below where, apart from the repetition of the word "waves", a rich array of fricative (e.g. /f/; /s/;/h/) and liquid (e.g. l/; /r/) sounds continues to be employed:

> Was it their colours? He allowed them to glow and fade, hue after hue: sunrise gold, the russet and green of apple orchards, azure of *waves*, the grey-fringed fleece of cloud (p. 180)

> … he seemed to hear the noise of dim *waves* and to see a winged form flying above the *waves* and slowly climbing the air … (p. 183)

> ... a breaking light … spread in endless succession to itself … *wave* of light by *wave* of light, *flooding* all the heavens with its soft *flushes* … (p. 187)

> O what sweet music! His soul was all dewy *wet*. Over his limbs in sleep pale cool *waves* of light had passed. (p. 235)

See also the occurrence of lexical items associated with "waves", like "liquid" and "flowing", which make the sensory perceptions Stephen feels difficult to pinpoint:

> ... and the first sight of the filthy cowyard at Stradbrook with its foul green puddles and clots of *liquid* dung and steaming bran troughs, sickened Stephen's heart. (p. 66)

and again in the following passages:

> His unrest issued from him like a *wave* of sound: and on the *tide* of *flowing* music the ark was journeying, trailing her cables of lanterns in her wake. (p. 79)

> ... like a cloud of vapour or like *waters circumfluent* in space the *liquid* letters of speech, symbols of the element of mystery, *flowed* forth over his brain. (p. 242)

> Imagine some foul and putrid corpse that has lain rotting and decomposing in the grave, a jelly-like mass of *liquid* corruption. (p. 129)

> The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, *flowing* round and round the persons and the action like a vital *sea*. (p. 233)

> A soft *liquid* joy like the noise of many *waters* flowed over his memory and he felt in his heart the soft peace of silent spaces of fading tenuous sky above the *waters*, of *oceanic* silence, of swallows flying through the *sea-dusk* over the *flowing waters*. … A soft *liquid* joy *flowed* through the words where the soft long vowels hurtled noiselessly and fell away, l*apping* and *flowing* back and ever shaking the white bells of their *waves* in mute chime and mute peal, and soft low swooning cry. (p. 245)

The repetition of words related to water and flux conjures up the movements of a body submerged into the surrounding reality, an effect achieved through the exploitation of fricatives (/s/; /f/; /h/), liquids (/l/) and glides (/w/):

> A conscious unrest *s*eethed in *h*is blood. *Y*es, it *w*as *h*er body *h*e *s*melt, a *w*ild and *l*anguid *s*mell, the tepid *l*imbs over *w*hich *h*is music *h*ad *fl*owed desirously and the *s*ecret *s*oft *l*inen upon *w*hich her *f*lesh distilled odour and a *dew*. (p. 254)

The same lexical and phonological items (repetition of the word "waves"; liquid and fricative consonants) set the rhythmic pattern of *The Waves*:

> *W*e sink as *w*e run. The *waves* close over us, the beech leaves meet above our *h*eads … The air no *l*onger *r*olls its *l*ong, unhappy, purple *waves* over us. *W*e touch earth; *w*e tread ground. (*The Waves,* pp. 8-9).

> I am tumbled; I am *s*tretched, among these *l*ong *l*ights, these *l*ong *waves*, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing. (p. 20)

> At home the *h*ay *waves* over the meadows. My father *l*eans upon the *s*tile, *s*moking. (p. 32)

> Now the trees come to earth; the brisk *waves* that *s*lap my *r*ibs *r*ock more gently, and my *h*eart *r*ides at anchor, *l*ike a *s*ailing-boat whose *s*ails slide *s*lowly down on to the white deck. (p. 35)

> The bird *f*lies; the *f*lower dances; but I *h*ear always the *s*ullen thud of the *waves*; and the chained beast *s*tamps on the beach. (p. 46)

> I, who would wish to *f*eel close over me the protective *waves* of the ordinary, catch with the tail of my eye some *f*ar *h*orizon; am aware of *h*ats bobbing up and down in perpetual disorder (p. 76)

and so on until the end of the novel:

> The *waves* broke on the *s*hore. (p. 248)

As in *A Portrait*, also in *The Waves* the fluidity of the rhythm is achieved through the repetition of words associated with water (e.g. "flowing") and the use of consonant sounds which reproduce the idea of a continuous flowing movement:

> It seems as if the whole world were *flowing* and curving - Or perhaps they saw the splendour of the *f*lowers making a *l*ight of *flowing* purple over the beds. (p. 28)

> Now there *w*as only the *liquid s*hadow of the cloud … *S*cent and *f*lowers, *r*adiance and *h*eat, are distilled *h*ere to a *f*iery, to a *y*ellow *l*iquid … I *s*tream *l*ike a plant in the *r*iver, *flowing* this *w*ay, *flowing* that *w*ay, but *r*ooted, so that *h*e may come to me. (p. 83)

Below is a table summing up the frequency of occurrences (shown in brackets) in the two novels of words, nouns, verbs and adjectives associated with the idea of fluidity. The count was made by searching first the roots of specific words (e.g. "wave"; "flow") and then the affixes attached to them (e.g "flow+ing=flowing"), both through derivational and inflectional processes. The total occurrences per item, which include all the word forms deriving from the same stem/root, do not seem to differ significantly in the two works (except for "wave/s", which gives the title to Woolf's novel). This suggests that Virginia Woolf and James Joyce drew from a similar inventory of lexical, phonological and syntactic items to give voice to their characters, both the male and the female ones:

The Waves	*A Portrait*
1.wave/s(78)	1.waves/s (25)
2.flow/ing/s (25)	2.flow/ed/ing(19)
3.soft (15)	3.soft (73)
4.water/s (71)	4.water/s/ing/ed/y (68)
5.liquid (3)	5.liquid (6)
6.stream/s/ed/ing (29)	6.stream/s/ed/ing (19)
7.fluid + flood/s (9)	7.fluid + flood/s (14)

Table 1
Occurrences of word-forms associated with water and flux in *The Waves* and *A Portrait*.

In addition to the features above, the extensive use of fricative and liquid sounds in the two novels also confirm that when semiotic moments of "non identity" surface, language loses its logical meaning and recovers, as Kristeva (1986a, p. 20) argues, the "tempo of the voice" as well as its "rapidity of delivery". Yet, while in *The Wave*s such moments shape the entire texture of the novel, in Joyce they are singled out of those moments of crisis when Stephen's soul, mind and body are in a turmoil. When this happens, language becomes, as already pointed out, un-gendered.

4. Conclusions and further remarks

In this article I have argued that even though differences in the way women and men speak have been observed, these have not been attributed to women and men using a different language system, but to preferences in the selection of certain features due to socio-cultural variables. There is no evidence, in fact, that women and men are endowed with separate mechanisms to acquire language as a system, since both genders resort to the same computational operations. Yet, as illustrated in Section 2, they may use different lexical items, different syntactic structures and different sounds according to the input received from the environment. This explains why it is more appropriate to speak of gender-preferential rather than of gender-exclusive features. On the other hand, as McConnel-Ginet (1988, p. 77) fittingly suggests, language users have an inventory of beliefs about language that far exceeds the rules of grammar they possess.

There are, however, situations in which features typically associated with the female language and features typically associated with the male language may merge into each other. This may occur in moments of intense emotional confusion and bewilderment when the semiotic language re-emerges, temporarily disrupting the fixed, stable meanings of the symbolic language (Kristeva 1986a, 1986b, 1988). In such moments, language becomes un-gendered: a reminiscence of child's babbling, made up of repetitions –

structural, lexical, phonological – and a melodic, fluid rhythm. The latter, especially, is probably the most salient feature of a semiotic language. The melodic patterns it yields, as I have tried to show, is a crucial feature both of *A Portrait* and *The Waves*, since it gives voice to the characters' movements, both those of the body and those of the mind. The excerpts discussed illustrate that the semiotic language continuously surfaces in *The Waves* whenever the six characters reflect about their identity and their place in society, while in *A Portrait* whenever the hero, Stephen Dedalus, is torn between what his heart suggests and what his mind orders. It is a language rich in repetitions of lexical items related to water and flux; in sounds rich in fricative and liquid consonants which convey a rhythmic pattern; and in the use of verbs with no intrinsic end-point, which place the characters' voices in an undetermined temporal dimension. Even though rooted in the feminine, such a language can be accessed by the other gender when moments of strain and tension arise. When it does, it is mainly an aural language:

> His own consciousness of language was *ebbing* from his brain and *tricking* into the very words themselves which set to *band* and *disband* themselves in wayward *rhythms*. (*A Portrait,* p. 193)

writes Joyce about Stephen, in the same way as Virginia Woolf gives voice to Neville's reflections on language:

> Now begins to *rise* in me the familiar *rhythm*; words that have lain dormant now *lift*, now *toss* their crests, and *fall* and *rise*, and *fall* and *rise* again. (*The Waves,* p. 67)

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