Bio

Senka Majetić was born in Zagreb, graduated in English language and literature, obtained the title Master of Philological Sciences and the scientific degree Doctor of Science. For her MA thesis, Majetić explored the corpora of monolingual English – English dictionaries. Her doctoral dissertation entitled ‘Sociolinguistic analysis of asynchronous communication with special reference to gender differences in language’ was defended at the University of Sarajevo.

Further reading

Majetić, S, (2023) Applying medical truths to qualitative, descriptive and statistical gender spotting analysis of telephone conversations and dialogues of elderly population speech in Muriel Spark’s novel Memento Mori, revisiting the deficit and genderlect models combined. Eximia, 6(1), 113–128.

Memento Mori – A comparative analysis of gendered language in the face of death
If you want evidence of women’s inferiority to men, just listen to how they speak – they always sound so indecisive and weak-willed.’ Such a comment may seem laughable, but its distorted logic has been a cornerstone of gender-based discrimination for centuries and, unfortunately, in some cultures, prevails. While it’s arguable that within human communication, women adopt styles that differ from men, difference is not a defence for stratification and discrimination. If you dig deeper into those differences, as Dr Senka Majetić has done, you will find a remarkable depth of nuance that not only takes a heavy hammer to such outdated notions but offers a light to those examining others feeling the brunt of discrimination.

Male language the norm
For many years in sociolinguistic studies, the male voice was the authority. The Deficit Model at the centre of studies suggested that male language was the norm, and female language deviated from this norm and was lacking or inferior. This model may seem outdated, but it is still hanging on.

The Genderlect Model, proposed by American linguist Deborah Tannen, challenges the Deficit Model. It says that men’s and women’s linguistic styles differ because they serve different functions. For example, men may use a more assertive or competitive style to report and entrench status. On the other hand, women may use a more collaborative and rapport-building communication style to establish and develop connections and maintain relationships. The Genderlect Model frames these differences not as deficiencies but as distinct ‘dialects’ or ‘genderlects.’

For Majetić, an opportunity to revisit these two models and the concept of gendered language lay in a renowned 1950s English novel with a somewhat irreverent view of death.

Remember, you must die
The book at the centre of Majetić’s study is Memento Mori by Muriel Spark, a darkly comedic novel set in England, revolving around a group of elderly characters interconnected through various relationships. They each receive a telephone call from a mysterious caller telling them, ‘Remember, you must die,’ prompting their exploration of the inevitability of death. Through a blend of humour and poignancy, Spark delves into the complexities of human relationships, the search for meaning in life, and the confrontation with mortality. Importantly for Majetić, most characters are women, suggesting a rich tapestry of the female voice.

Employing various analytical methods, Majetić dissects the complexities of the language and communication patterns among the novel’s characters, particularly from a gender perspective. Using content analysis, she quantitatively examines the frequency and distribution of gendered language features within the novel, such as tag questions, interjectional hedges, and other linguistic markers. Tag questions are short questions added to the end of statements, turning them into questions – such as ‘It’s cold in here, isn’t it?’ – and are more common in female vocal communication. Interjectional hedges are words or phrases such as ‘perhaps,’ ‘maybe,’ and ‘I think,’ which can soften a statement.

Depending on how you view them, such linguistic markers suggest the speaker is indecisive, hesitant, or unassertive or that they show a sense of openness for further discussion and encourage interaction. By quantifying these features, Majetić provides empirical evidence to support claims of the Deficit Model at the centre of studies suggested that male language was the norm, and female language deviated from this norm and was lacking or inferior.

Majetić provides insights into how age-related cognitive changes might influence speech patterns.
Because most of the characters in *Memento Mori* are elderly, Majetić uses established medical and neuroscientific findings to deepen the analysis of their language, providing insights into how age-related cognitive changes might influence speech patterns.

Majetić also applies discourse analysis to explore how the characters use language to construct their identities, interact with each other, and navigate social hierarchies. Furthermore, by using comparative analysis, she contrasts the language used by the novel’s male and female characters. But while there were indeed differences, most of the characters share the spectre of imminent death due to their advanced age. This provides another layer to Majetić’s research.

**Irrelevant and off-topic**

Because most of the characters in *Memento Mori* are elderly, Majetić uses established medical and neuroscientific findings to deepen the analysis of their language, providing insights into how age-related cognitive changes might influence speech patterns. Indeed, much of the indecisiveness, hesitation, or unassertiveness suggested by the characters’ language and their tendency for irrelevant or off-topic conversation can be attributed to older people’s inevitable neurodegeneration.

For years, discrimination against women has been justified, in part, by perceived differences in how men and women communicate. But while there are differences, there are no deficiencies. By integrating the numerical data from content analysis with the more nuanced insights from the discourse and comparative analysis, Majetić’s mixed-method, interdisciplinary study not only enriches the literary analysis of a celebrated piece of English literature but contributes to a better understanding of gendered communication, and its intersection with ageing and cognition.

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**Personal response**

*How can what you’ve learned be used to examine other social groups or communities who experience discrimination, such as minorities of transgender people?*

We need to discuss the conversational practices of all sexual identities as potentially felicitous on a localised level (Hall, 2006: 374–375).

*What in your study of the language used in the novel surprised you, and why?*

Male genderlect indicators: status, independence, information, orders and conflict are presented in occasional reports or telephone conversations of police officers and reports in the newspapers usually read by a male character to females. The domination of various adjectives is more than evident. Similes and metaphors also dominate as well as questions. The number of questions is an additional confirmation of the female language dominance hypothesis. Polite form questions have been identified as well as the use of affirmative sentence questions. Uncertainty is expressed with hedges. The use of interjectional hedges in front of the wh- questions as expressions of feelings might be attributed to the elderly population’s speech characteristics as well as the repetition of the same and almost the same questions which is combined with question tags. The ‘female’ use of questions ‘to keep the conversation going’ dominates in the novel *Memento Mori* which could additionally be added to the female language dominance hypothesis confirmation. The likelihood of the production of irrelevant or off-topic information among elderly characters in the novel is great, the quality of semantic knowledge and the ability to retrieve information are potentially problematic which is similar to recent studies on the elderly population findings. The vocabulary of the elderly is qualified as being ‘broader’ indicating a richer repository of semantic knowledge which is also equivalent to previous findings. Idiolects of the main characters could be seen in the specific use of grammar and vocabulary.

*If Memento Mori offers a rich tapestry of the female voice, what celebrated novels in the English language might offer the gender opposite and invite similar study?*

Each and every novel written by Ian McEwan, and each and every novel by Nick Hornby!
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