

LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED LIVES IN ALICE MUNRO'S "BOYS AND GIRLS"

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Abstract

In Alice Munro's short story "Boys and Girls," society's involvement in creating gendered lives is narrated by an eleven-year-old girl. To provide a linguistic analysis of her psychosexual development shaped by her family, in this study, all utterances are analyzed by employing a theoretical framework composed of Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory and Lipsitz Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory. Analysis of the utterances postulates that the family's stereotypical and value-ridden statements affect the child's understanding of the making of a woman as the narrator's psychosexual development occurs under the influence of sex-typed individuals who mainly use implicit performatives primarily marked as verdictive utterances. Hence, the narrator's immediate social environment exerts their authority and power through specific linguistic constructions, as exemplified in the forceful use of the verdictives.

Keywords: Sex-typing; Discourse; Speech Act Theory; Gender Schema Theory

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Introduction

Alice Munro, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, is known for her stories set in small towns in Canada where the characters are town-dwellers who suffer from tense external relationships and internal moral conflicts. As Dahlie (1978) argues, Munro's "fiction is rooted tangibly in the social realism of the rural and small-town world of her own experience" (56), which, undoubtedly, shapes the content of Munro's writing that is deeply rooted in the writer's overall lived experience as a woman writer whose fiction "cannot be easily categorized" (70). One specific aspect of Munro's fiction is its simple and direct language. Dickler Awano claims, "Her sentences, while never dull, are clear and unvarnished. She has great rhythm. She knows just how long each line should be, and when a longer sentence should be followed by a shorter one" (2006, 91).

The short story as a genre has always been differentiated because of its unique characteristics, mainly because "the short story clearly proceeds towards its goal with a particular speed and effectiveness: within only a few pages, the reader is introduced to a full universe and knows what is at stake in the narrative" (Goyet 2014, 55). While brevity in short story writing has certain stylistic elements that make this genre original, Munro's linguistic choices in creating characters and dialogues make her fiction life-like. One can easily recognize that the language of such writing is closer to daily language than it is to the wording of any other work of fiction written during Munro's active years in Canadian literature.

Martín-Lucas' (2018, 195) study of two Canadian short stories from feminist perspectives articulated that characters' emotions were dealt with "not as psychological states but as social and cultural practices." Similarly, Munro's fiction forces readers to question "how women's worlds are to be symbolically interpreted" (Irvine 1987, 65). Published in her short story collection titled *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968, "Boys and Girls" deals with pertinent issues such as mother-daughter relationships, generational gap, and gender differences. Particularly in "Boys and Girls," Munro focuses on a girl's psychosexual development, trying to understand society's numerous expectations. In this semi-autobiographical account, a nameless narrator expresses her childhood memories through dialogues with her family and a worker on their farm. The story is an example of Bildungsroman focusing on the character development of its narrator, who happens to be the protagonist. In the story, the readers are exposed to a series of societal demands placed on a girl who must go through a change in her psychosexual status at the cost of abandoning childhood behaviors.

A closer reading of the text reveals that the narrator's psychosexual development occurs as she is exposed to what farm people say about and to her. Through the words of her parents and grandmother, she begins to understand the stereotypical traits of being a woman and also senses that society perceives women as the inferior sex. Her changing societal position goes hand in hand with the narrator's interactions with the adults around her. Thus, by employing two theories, J. L. Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962) and Sandra Lipsitz Bem's

Gender Schema Theory (1981), this study scrutinizes society's effect on a female child's psychosexual development. In this study, Munro's fiction is scrutinized from a linguistic perspective by examining the textual references to males and females and their impact on the narrator, which includes an examination of several conspicuous sentences in terms of their pragmatic meanings and performative values. By systematically analyzing the utterances from a linguistic perspective focusing on their connotations as representatives of society's sex-based instructions, the implicatures of women's societal position are interpreted to articulate how Munro exemplifies a girl's psychosexual development in a male-centered sexual regime.

Theoretical Background

Austin's Speech Act Theory suggests that utterances "have specific effects on other people and impact the world in which they are uttered" (Gibbons and Whiteley 2018, 86). To Austin, there is a distinction between the literal meaning of what is said and its function within the context. Locutionary acts suggest literal meanings, while expressions' contextual effects (or functions) are called illocutionary acts. Pragmatic meanings of utterances are further bound to five major performative categories, namely, expositives (clarifying reasons and arguments), commissives (causing speakers to commit themselves to a task), behabitives (attitudes and social behaviors), exercitives (exerting power and authority), and verdictives (giving a verdict or appraisal). These categories are the speech acts that shape our understanding and actions, formally affecting the contexts in which they are uttered. In addition, both performative and constative utterances may lead to performative outcomes. Butler (1997, 11) indicates that a "constative claim is always to some degree performative." Therefore, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, utterances may function as performatives in language, implying various meanings such as warnings, appreciations, or offenses.

Any effect caused by these speech acts is called perlocutionary effect, which can be intentional (with connotative meanings attached) or actual (denotative in nature), depending on the characteristic of the utterance. Thus, speech acts are felicitous (well-suited for the purpose) or non-felicitous if not true or false. However, daily language use is primarily composed of "illocutionary acts with felicity conditions rather than propositions with truth conditions" (Vanderveken and Sumusu 2001, 4). Hence, relevant conditions must be met for an illocutionary act to become felicitous. In Austin's words, "An illocutionary act is felicitous when all the felicity conditions stipulated in its definition are satisfied" (Allan 1997, 400).

Analyzing Munro's "Boys and Girls" provides the track of a child's psychological development and internal journey toward being a woman. It shows how effective society is in a child's psychosexual development. Lipsitz Bem theorizes this process as sex-typing and argues that cultures teach children to be men or women by imposing predetermined gender roles for each sex. Lipsitz Bem's (1981) cognitive approach further argues that society acts as the

primary agent affecting individuals' thought patterns in a way to make them lead gendered lives. Hence, the societal schema contains appropriate male and female roles expected from its members.

What gender schema theory proposes is that individuals in a community go through "gender-based schematic processing," through which society's "sex-linked associations that constitute the gender schema" are passed onto individuals. In this socialization process, "sex-typing results, in part, from the fact that the self-concept itself gets assimilated into the gender schema" (Lipsitz Bem *Gender Schema* 355). These schemas dictate gender-appropriate behaviors and thus shape people's subjectivities by prescribing what they can or cannot do in society as individuals. Hence, children develop an awareness of gender-specific qualities functioning as cultural norms. These norms are created in response to all the expectations to which each sex is supposed to adhere. Being exposed to these norms as soon as they are born, people face consequences such as social disapproval if they fail to follow these unwritten rules. Thus, this schema forces individuals to adjust their behaviors according to societal expectations. In this gender learning process, as Lipsitz Bem articulates:

(...) the child is also learning to invoke this heterogeneous network of sex-related associations to evaluate and assimilate new information. The child, in short, learns to process information in terms of an evolving gender schema, and it is this gender-based schematic processing that constitutes the heart of the present account of sex typing." (*Gender Schema* 355)

In her theory, Lipsitz Bem offers four gender categories: sex-typed, cross-typed, androgynous, and undifferentiated. Sex-typed individuals describe themselves following gender schemas created by society, while cross-typed individuals identify themselves with opposite genders. Conversely, androgynous individuals can feature both masculine and feminine traits. Finally, undifferentiated individuals are not affected by the processes of gender schemas about which, as the theory indicates, "individuals are relatively schematic or aschematic with respect to gender" (Hudak 1993, 279). These schemas further demand that individuals become sex-typed individuals who "evaluate different ways of behaving in terms of the cultural definitions of gender appropriateness and reject any way of behaving that does not match their sex" (Lipsitz Bem *The Lenses* 1993, 126).

Findings and Discussion

"Boys and Girls" unfolds as the narrator describes her family's fox farm in which she lives with her parents and little brother, Laird. The eleven-year-old narrator admittedly enjoys helping her father with his daily work on the farm. However, she soon realizes that her parents expect her to help her mother with the chores, mainly because she is the only girl there. As the title may imply, her brother comes first in their parents' eyes, and she is always doomed to be secondary to him even though she is the elder child. Therefore, she should stay

home to deal with the domestic chores just like all those socially-appropriate girls would do. Even in this exposition, readers anticipate the existence of stereotypical attributions that lead the female child to become a gendered adult.

Although she is just a child, she is made aware of her gender at the earliest age. Reading the short story shows that she is raised according to socially-accepted gender roles. From what she hears in her environment, she first remembers what a salesman says when he comes to the farm. Her father introduces her as his “new hired hand” (Munro 1998, 115), and the salesman is surprised because he does not expect to see a girl working on a farm: “‘Could of fooled me’ said the salesman. ‘I thought it was only a girl!’” (Munro 115). His astonishment stems from the fact that working on a farm, away from home, is an unusual job for a girl because the jobs women can do are thought to be limited. The salesman’s utterance displays the characteristics behaviors, known as “acts of adopting an attitude” (Sbisá 2013, 4).

The narrator begins to be aware of the schema set by society through her interaction with her family and people on the farm. She becomes aware of discrimination around her by witnessing the different treatment her brother gets. She gradually feels as if her brother were of more importance, and as a girl, she were secondary to him. Even though she thinks she is much more intelligent and helpful, she hears such utterances as: “Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you’ll have a real help” (Munro 116). Such statements belittle her contribution to their farm while causing her to question her place and value in her family. Thus, her mother’s assertion as an exercitive indicates “giving of a decision in favour of or against a certain course of action, or advocacy of it. It is a decision that something is to be so, as distinct from a judgment that it is so” (qt. in Ballmer and Brennenstuhl 1981, 54). Such an utterance, ostensibly functioning as an advice, implies that working on a farm is a job for men, and women cannot be successful at men’s jobs no matter how much they try.

When the narrator finds out her mother’s thoughts regarding Laird, who is expected to be more helpful with the chores on the farm just because he is the male child, she says nothing, but she starts questioning what others tell her. Comparing herself to her brother, she thinks to herself: “He was no help to anybody. Where was he now? Swinging himself sick on the swing, going around in circles, or trying to catch caterpillars. He never once stayed with me till I was finished” (Munro 1998, 116). Although she does not talk back, she tries to find out why his help is appreciated more. Correspondingly, her mother continues complaining about her domestic chores. For her mother, she is always with her father, watching him with the foxes and helping him frequently: “I just get my back turned, and she runs off. It’s not like I had a girl in the family at all” (Munro 117). Her statement reveals her thinking and functions as a behavior, implying that women need to do the household chores, but men do not. All the while, the narrator sits silently and wishes to be invisible.

Under her mother’s continuous complaints about her, the girl learns that a woman’s role is to care for the house and provide for her family. At the same time, the

men on the farm are supposed to work outside and make money, a direct reflection of the expectations governing the real world: “Conventionally, patriarchal thinking tends to posit a biological explanation for gender inequality: women are supposed to be child bearers and the primary caregivers, while men should provide for the family through their work” (Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2021, 57). While men are involved with more severe issues by participating in the course of production, women take the roles of being a good wife and a good mother: “Women are excluded from all the public spaces, such as the assembly or the market, where the games ordinarily considered the most serious ones of human existence, such as the games of honour, are played out” (Bourdieu 2001, 49). Some consequences await the women who fail in fulfilling societal expectations: “Without economic means, the single woman faced social degradation, an additional diminishment since she was seen as much less than a wife or widow” (Bild 2017, 56). As the narrator feels she has nothing else to do as a woman but to follow the social norms set, she remains questioning but in silence. This cognitive schema passed from the elderly to her not only demands her to appropriate her perceptions and behaviors but pushes her to a space that gives very little chance for her to realize her potential.

Another family member who constantly teaches the narrator how to be a ‘good girl’ is the narrator’s grandmother. As implied performatives, many of her sentences function as verdictives, “an exercise of judgment” (Austin 1962, 162). Such statements bound to value judgments give readers the feeling that girls are not allowed to behave the way they want because of normalcy, since there are some rules for girls and boys. However, boys seem free from judgmental statements as this sort of language is spared for girls in the short story: “My grandmother came to stay with us for a few weeks, and I heard other things. ‘Girls don’t slam doors like that.’ ‘Girls keep their knees together when they sit down.’ And worse still, when I asked some questions, ‘That’s none of girls’ business’” (Munro 119).

With the rules set by society and carried out with her grandmother’s words, the narrator learns that girls always have to be courteous and graceful, while there is no such rule for boys. In this realm, boys can be mad or rude. Girls need to watch out for their way of sitting because they have no right to sit as they wish and have to cover certain parts of their bodies while sitting. Thus, these stereotypical norms appear to be fundamental to raising decent girls. The most effective sentences that her grandmother dictates, and that makes the narrator question the most, indicate that girls should be given limited information on some issues as their capability of understanding is little, or they have no right to comment on serious concerns. Some questions are not expected to be asked by girls because some matters can never be a girls’ concern. The narrator changes her attitude toward her grandmother’s statements, and begins to resist them in a passive-aggressive way. In contrast, she never reacts when she feels uncomfortable with what her parents say: “I continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures I kept myself free” (Munro 119). However, she keeps learning these socially-accepted behaviors and acts upon them now that her current role has become that of a good girl in society.

Starting the story as a girl, the narrator displays an accurate character development as she starts to understand how being a girl differs from being a boy. Readers witness a significant change in her world perception as the story proceeds. While she is an independent child who enjoys helping her father with the foxes on the farm, she slowly accepts to become the type of woman her family environment expects. This process, in other words, is the learning of gender roles specified by others around her:

A story might start off in the old way, with a spectacular danger, a fire or wild animals, and for a while I might rescue people; then things would change around, and instead, somebody would be rescuing me. It might be a boy from our class at school, or even Mr. Campbell, our teacher, who tickled girls under the arms. And at this point the story concerned itself at great length with what I looked like—how long my hair was and what kind of dress I had on; by the time I had these details worked out the real excitement of the story was lost. (Munro 125)

As exemplified by the quotation above, this gendered learning starts when she comes to accept her position as a girl who is to be rescued by the opposite sex. This growing awareness also suggests how her prior genderless activities and perceptions turn into her acceptance of her role being secondary to men. As a striking passage from the story, these lines reveal the confusion that the narrator experiences in her inner world. Apart from the teacher's abuse of the students, she struggles with society's expectations of her as she tries to choose between what she is and what she is expected to be. Although she does not care about the dress codes and hairstyles that would make her 'girly,' she soon comes to sense that she needs to embrace her role as a woman. Thus, her social circle raises her awareness of being a girl creating an artificial inclination to her gender: "Here, then, enters an internalized motivational factor that prompts the individual to regulate his or her behavior so that it conforms to the culture's definitions of maleness and femaleness" (Lipsitz Bem *Gender Schema* 355). Though her words may sound like she chose to change her manners as a girl, the readers are well-informed that her family has a significant role in sex-typing, imposing on her the parts of her gender and the social norms widely accepted. Such sex-typing circles women's existence and leaves them in continuous questioning, which is typical of Munro's fiction since "What makes Munro's characters so enthralling is their inconsistency; like real people, at one moment they declare they will cover the house in new siding, at the next, they vomit on their way to a hospital. They fight against and seek refuge in the people they love" (Valdes 2006, 87).

No matter how fast she displays character development towards the criterion of her gender role, the narrator's eventual acceptance of society's patterns surprisingly does not occur because of her mother's or her grandmother's words. Even though she is always sure of her mother's attitudes toward sex-determined roles in the house, she trusts her father's ethos. She always hopes he will not listen to her mother and pay attention to the gender differences between his children.

However, one day she learns that one of the farm horses, Flora, will be killed since she is not young and helpful anymore. The horse is full of desire to live, and she runs away desperately when the narrator's father and Henry, a hired man, try to catch her. Probably affected by her rebellious survival instinct, the narrator does not shut the door even though she can and lets Flora run off the farm. Laird, the only witness of her minor crime, snitches on her, telling his parents that his sister did not shut the door on purpose to let Flora flee. Her father's reaction is harsh even though he manages to keep calm and seems not to be mad: "Never mind," my father said. He spoke with resignation, even good humor, the words which absolved and dismissed me for good. 'She's only a girl,' he said" (Munro 126). Her father disdains her because of her gender with these statements, although he could stay frosty. His utterance may serve as an example of expositives utilized "in acts of exposition involving the expounding of views, the conducting of arguments, and the clarifying of usages and of references" (Austin 1962, 160). His expectations from his daughter seem to have lowered. He implicitly asserts that a girl's capacity is limited, as emphasized by the word 'only.' His sentence also functions as a realization of the felicity condition at the end of the story because it leads to the acceptance of these limitations: "I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true" (Munro 126).

In the course of the plot action, the narrator learns what it is to be a woman through various utterances she hears from those who live and work on the farm. As the analysis of the dialogues above shows, most of these utterances that shape the narrator's understanding of society's gender role distribution are verdictives. In addition, statements such as "When a horse's teeth's gone, he's gone. That's about the way" (119) and "You sound silly" (124) also function as verdictives implying performatives. She listens to such statements with no response; nevertheless, they lead her to accept her fate, and eventually, all these utterances become felicitous.

Conclusion

According to Lipsitz Bem's Gender Schema Theory, society shapes one's psychosexual development, moving the individual slowly to gendered lives by imposing some roles on each sex through the process of passing information, which is called sex-typing. In "Boys and Girls," a typical coming-of-age story is narrated in which the narrator goes through a character development process. In this process, she raises awareness of her gender and the roles that come with it. Her gender and personality are gradually shaped through the words uttered by her family, and at the same time, her perception of the world begins to change. In Lipsitz Bem's terms, she is sex-typed by slowly getting away from her character traits and self-concepts while adopting the stereotypes of her gender to become a good woman. The analysis of the utterances put forward by fictional characters through the theoretical framework shows that most of the statements voiced by the elderly characters are verdictive in nature.

As a result of this gender-informed linguistic analysis, it can be concluded that the narrator is discursively convinced to start behaving as common-sense dictates, eventually learning how to play the female role specified by norms of the patriarchal hierarchy where she's been raised. This gender role acquiring, as the analysis of the utterances is considered, is processed through certain kinds of statements such as verdictives. We witness that the various utterances she hears impose socially accepted behaviors on her that cannot be resisted. Our analysis further shows that genders do not exist in external reality a priori. Society essentially creates genders and gender roles as artificial phenomena, primarily through specific linguistic constructions. Culture shapes every child's behavior by giving each sex a different set of personality traits and ways of perceiving. Finally, it can be concluded that a specific gender role is assigned to the narrator through such utterances. Thus, her psychosexual development results in being a sex-typed individual, as this process is shaped mainly by the language used by others that make each sex lead gendered lives not only in Munro's fiction but also in real life.

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