

# The Construction of Women in US History Textbooks

Kylile Jabjiniak<sup>1</sup> and Anne McCabe<sup>1#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Saint Louis University – Madrid Campus

#Advisor

## ABSTRACT

Due the influence of historical perceptions on contemporary world views and the capacity of language to reflect values and ideas, the critical examination of how history is framed and taught is a necessary academic endeavor. The study of textbooks is particularly crucial because of their authoritative nature and fundamental impact on education. Through a systemic functional linguistic analysis of selected texts from an introductory, college-level US history textbook, this paper examines the construction of women in educational historical narratives. Three selections focused on women were selected from textbook chapters, each representing a different century since the founding of the United States, and each selection was analyzed using the theme/rheme construct. The results underscore the ongoing limitations to the portrayal of women's roles and agency in history textbooks as well as concerns of reinforced patriarchal constructions of power and women's societal place that are reflected at the level of linguistic choices in textbook-writing.

## **Introduction**

Across many cultural and national contexts, the way history is told tends to downplay the roles and experiences of women. In the case of school history textbooks, this marginalization becomes visible in the lack of richness or detail regarding women's historical agency. The experience and actions of women in history are often overlooked and typically more nuanced than what could be collectivized in the small sub-section many textbooks delegate to the story of women. From a linguistic perspective, this problem is highlighted by the statement from Clark (2005), upon completing an analysis of the construction of women in Canadian history textbooks, that "women, when included, are often relegated to sidebars" and this separation "conveys the message that women are peripheral to the core narrative". The construction of women in US history textbooks is not immune from such shortcomings- even many high-level history textbooks for high school and college students still enforce the construction of history as men's story with women playing side-parts and supporting roles.

## **Significance**

The linguistic study of the construction of women in high textbooks is necessary due to both the importance of textbooks themselves and the capacity of language to reflect world view. Primarily, the authoritative nature of textbooks shapes the way students perceive history, and, in turn, contemporary society (Chipanda & Wassermann, 2011). Therefore, the linguistic construction of the textbook content is worthy of study in attempt to understand the messages and ideas students absorb throughout their academic trajectory.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Background**

Theme/rheme analysis was selected for its useful application in determining how the organization of language shapes its message. The systemic function linguistic tradition views the linguistic organization of the clause in English as divided into two parts, which combine to create its message. The first element of the clause, known as the theme, has

particular importance in English as it is ‘the point of departure for the message’ (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014: 83). The rest of the message is categorized as the rheme. While there are three main types of theme, this analysis focuses on the ideational theme of each analyzed clause because the other types of themes (textual and interpersonal) are preceding and may provide information to the clause relevance or the speaker’s take or judgement on the proposition, but the ideational theme is most significant in analyzing construction of an idea as it consists of “any participant, process or circumstance which appears in the first position in the clause” (McCabe, 2017: 190). Textual themes contain conjunctions or continuatives used to link ideas (such as “in addition to”) and interpersonal themes express perspective of the writer (such as “perhaps”), so they are not as pertinent as ideational theme in analyzing thematic choices tied to idea construction. In Table 1, the breakdown of clauses into theme and rheme as well as examples of circumstances and processes functioning as theme are shown.

**Table 1: Theme and Rheme within clauses and Theme content**

In colonial America,	Circumstance	women shouldered enormous domestic and child-rearing responsibilities
The movement	Participant	moved forward with legal action and activism.
Theme	Theme content	Rheme

Within text, theme is significant in its reflection and construction of identities and ideologies. The experiential content (the participant, process, or circumstance) that appears within the theme of a clause constructs a particular experience that can be analyzed through application of a theme/rheme analysis. For example, an analysis of the construction of ideology through thematic choices in UK political discourse on Brexit was conducted in 2018 with the selection of three texts delivered by former British Prime Minister Theresa May (Leung, 2018). The content of the themes, such as the use of “we” or titles such as “Mr. Speaker” in thematic positions was analyzed in their construction of a relationship of solidarity and connection to the British public as well as the maintenance of the formality of May’s institutional communication setting (Leung, 2018).

Within a more specialized focus, the construction of gender through thematic choices has also been analyzed in several contexts. Mee (2014) revealed the subordinated female identity of the protagonist of Malay author Che Husna Azhari’s short story *Mariah* through a detailed analysis of thematic choices in the text. By exhibiting the limited amount of time the female protagonist Marah serves as a doer of actions in the story and the domination of a male character in the text’s topical themes (152 topical themes compared to *Mariah*’s 50), Mee (2014) reveals how *Mariah* is subjected to “an object, a muted shadow” within her own story that takes place within a Malaysian and Islamic context. The construction of gender in textbooks has also been previously examined through a theme/rheme analysis. In a study of Iranian high school English textbooks, researchers underlined how the higher proportion of males to females in the theme position and in the role of actors throughout the texts reinforced the construction of patriarchal dynamics, in which men’s greater relation to power and influence is reflected through their greater visibility, extending even to the linguistic level (Gharbavi & Ahmad Mousavi, 2012).

## Methods

A theme/rheme analysis of the portrayal of women in a US history textbook was conducted through the examination of sections from three different chapters of an introductory college-level history textbook. The textbook, titled *U.S. History*, is publicly available online through a nonprofit based at Rice University, and its description outlines its purpose for introductory history courses and proclaims that its focus on “key forces that form the American experience, with particular attention to issues of race, class, and gender” (Corbett et. al., 2014). The textbook’s claim of its “particular attention” to gender ensured the inclusion of gender-focused content for analysis, and sections from each

chapter were selected due to their focus upon gender perspectives within their perspective eras (reflected in the fact that, for example, first selected segment was titled “women”). Three chapters were selected to each represent a different century since the founding of the United States: one from each the Revolutionary War period, the Progressive Movement, and the period 1968-1980.

## Results and Discussion

In the first chapter analyzed, Chapter 6: America’s War for Independence, the segment selected was the section of the chapter titled “women” and focused on explaining women’s role during the Revolutionary War period in the United States. The conduct of a theme/rheme analysis and subsequent comparison of the substance of the section’s themes divulged several notable observations based on the results displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Results from Chapter 6: America’s War for Independence**

Theme	Content of Theme (Participant, Process, or Circumstance)
In colonial America	Circumstance
The war for independence	Participant
Rebel leaders	Participant
This	Participant
Women	Participant
The Revolution	Participant
They	Participant
The Daughters of Liberty	Participant
Esther DeBerdt Reed of Philadelphia	Participant
In “The Sentiments of an American Woman” (1780)	Circumstance
Reed and other women in Philadelphia	Participant
Women who did not share Reed’s prominent status	Participant
During shortages	Circumstance
Some women	Participant
Crowds of women	Participant
If a merchant refused	Circumstance
Still other women	Participant

First, it was significant that there were only two occurrences when the themes outlining women as participants were narrowed to specific women or groups; these specific themes in reference to women were to Esther DeBerdt Reed, the founder of the Ladies Association of Philadelphia that raised funds for the Continental Army, and to the Daughters of Liberty, an organization that worked to support the colonies’ revolutionary efforts. In all other instances in which the themes consisted of women as participants, women were referred to as a collective, either as simply “women”, “they”, “Reed and other women in Philadelphia”, “women who did not share Reed’s prominent status”, “some women”, “crowds of women”, “still other women” or “a few [women]”. The reference of women as a collective is interesting because, first, it would be difficult to imagine men being collectivized in the same way, and second, because this collectivization essentializes the female experience into that of a collective one rather than constructing women as individual actors in history.

Other observations include that the first paragraph features several sentences in which women are not the theme, and the subjects refer to circumstances, nominalized processes, or other participants, such as “in colonial America”, “the war for independence”, or “rebel leaders”. The focus on themes that are not women can be interpreted as dismissive of the section’s titular subject, yet the tendency to emphasize relevant context and processes is, at the same time, characteristic of historical, textbook-style writing. However, a striking sentence is also found in the first paragraph. When describing how rebel leaders “required women to produce articles for war”, the use of “rebel leaders” as

the theme and participant while delegating mention of women to the rheme implies that the rebel leaders only consisted of men. In a similar analysis of the portrayal of women in Russian world history textbooks, it was pointed out that “the narratives dealt with masculine characteristics of power” constructed by “descriptions of issues of economy, revolution, war and international relations [...] all from a male perspective” (Muravyeva, 2006). The construction of power, particularly through war and revolution, as male is clearly visible in the *U.S. History* text as well; linguistically, only men are constructed as rebel leaders. In contrast, women are constructed as helpers but not as possessive of power or active in their own right, rather they are portrayed just as actors in support of men’s revolutionary endeavors.

Additionally, the choice to include a separate “women” section at all also has implications. The division of women’s role in history to its own subsection within the chapter quite literally imposes a visual and linguistic emphasis on their non-central role to the principal historical narrative. Furthermore, the construction of women’s stories as peripheral aligns with the trend of their collectivization, their limited inclusion as textual themes, and the male construction of power found throughout the chapter.

The next section analyzed was titled “Leaders Emerge in the Women’s Movement” and was located within the chapter “The Progressive Movement (1890-1920)”, and the results are displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3: Results from Chapter 21: The Progressive Movement (1890-1920)**

Theme	Content of Theme (Participant, Process, or Circumstance)
Women like Jane Addams and Florence Kelley	Participant
Female leaders	Participant
From these earlier efforts	Circumstance
Women	Participant
The movement	Participant
Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Florence Woodhull, and others	Participant
They	Participant
Cary	Participant
The committee	Participant
Susan B. Anthony	Participant
She	Participant
On July 4, 1876, during the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia	Circumstance
When the disconcerted presider, Vice President Ferry, refused to allow the document	Circumstance
By 1900	Circumstance
They	Participant
Women’s lives in the West	Participant
In 1890	Circumstance
Its leaders	Participant
Under the subsequent leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt	Circumstance
Its membership	Participant
Using modern marketing techniques like celebrity endorsements to attract a younger audience	Process
For some in the NAWSA	Participant
Frustrated with the lack of response by state and national legislators	Circumstance
When others in the group	Circumstance
Known as the Silent Sentinels	Circumstance
In the latter stages of their protests	Circumstance
Prison guards	Participant

At a time- during World War I- when women volunteered as army nurses, worked in vital defense industries, and supported Wilson’s campaign to “make the world safe for democracy”	Circumstance
Enlightened to the injustice toward all American women	Circumstance
While Catt and Paul used different strategies	Circumstance
The required thirty-six states	Participant

Many of the themes in the sections were participants, with frequent references to specific women in the themes, such as in the themes “women like Jane Addams and Florence Kelley”, “Mary Ann Shadd Carey, Florence Woodhull, and others”, “Cary”, and “Susan B. Anthony”. However, there were still many themes consisting of women collectivized as a group, such as the themes “female leaders”, “women”, “the committee”, “its membership”, “for some in NAWSA”, or when women’s lives were generalized in the theme “women’s lives in the West”. The generalization of the female experience and even of the lives of all the women in a region can be explained, in part, by the concept of historical significance. Clarke (2005) explains in her analysis of Canadian history textbooks that the key to more nuanced constructions of women in history is the recognition that “both the so-called public and private spheres have great bearing on how we live our lives as people [...] and that they are interconnected and overlapping”. Essentially, it is due to a narrow conception of what can be constituted as historically important that leads to the lack of focus and detail on what is not considered significant to the overall historical narrative, and typically this classification includes the occurrences of women’s traditionally delegated space, the private sphere.

As in the previous section, many themes were also circumstances describing historical time and place, such as “on July 4, 1876”, “by 1900” or “at a time-during World War I”, which are, again, typical of historical informative text. An interesting sentence near the end of the section describes President Wilson’s reaction to the abuse and torture endured by suffragettes during their imprisonment. The sentence asserts that “enlightened to the injustice toward all American women, he [President Wilson] changed his position in support of a woman’s constitutional right to vote”. Here, the theme consists of the circumstance “enlightened to the injustice toward all American woman” and the crafting of this speculated feeling as a circumstance constructs the perception of Wilson as kind-hearted and empathic and could perhaps tie into a narrative that many men are simply ignorant of women’s suffering, yet once “enlightened”, their actions become the key to progress of equal rights and societal standing. Of course, a problem with this narrative is the reduction of focus on the women who fought for such progress at great personal cost, such as the suffragette Alice Paul whose torture in jail so moved Wilson, and, who, notably, does not feature as an ideational theme in the text at all.

The last section analyzed was titled “Maybe Not Now” and was located in the chapter “Political Storms at Home and Abroad, 1968-1980”. Specific women were only included twice as themes (“Patsy Mink, the first Asian American woman elected to Congress” and Shirley Chisholm), as reflected in the results in Table 4. The first paragraph included most themes on the reaction to feminist movement (“the media” and “many reporters”). Interestingly, many processes in the text were nominalized as participants within the themes, such as “the feminist push for greater rights” and “many advances of women’s rights.” Nominalization in history textbooks was discussed by Moss (2010) as significant because the lack of an agent provides the reader with “the impression that these things simply happen of their own accord, or even of their own volition”. In the context of nominalization of processes in *U.S. History*’s discussion of the second-wave feminist movement, the lack of an agent is concerning because there is the implication that these pushes and advances occurred naturally, and there is a missing section of the narrative conveying the actors who carried out these processes. Similarly, the inclusion of many themes consisting of the reaction to the feminist movement rather than the movement’s actors and initiatives again supports the construction of the women themselves as peripheral to the core narrative.

**Table 4: Results from Chapter 30: Political Storms at Home and Abroad, 1968-1980**

Theme	Content of Theme (Participant, Process, or Circumstance)
The feminist push for greater rights	Participant
The media	Participant
Many reporters	Participant
The majority of feminists	Participant
In the 1970s	Circumstance
In 1973	Circumstance
This	Participant
Many advances in women’s rights	Participant
Patsy Mink, the first Asian American woman elected to Congress	Participant
Mink	Participant
She	Participant
In 1971	Circumstance
Shirley Chisholm	Participant
Born of immigrant parents	Circumstance
In the 1950’s	Circumstance
After leaving one organization over its refusal to involve women in the decision-making process	Circumstance
In 1968	Circumstance
Refusing to take the quiet role expected of new Representatives	Theme as clause (non-finite clause acting as a circumstance)
She	Participant
Chisholm	Participant
As a Presidential candidate	Circumstance
Men within the Congressional Black Caucus	Participant
The Democratic party	Participant
She	Participant
She	Participant
Despite all this	Circumstance
The ultimate political goal of the National Organization for Women (NOW)	Participant
The amendment	Participant
If the amendment was not ratified by thirty-eight states by 1979	Theme as clause (non-finite clause acting as a circumstance)
Twenty-two states	Participant
In the next two years	Circumstance
In 1979	Circumstance
It	Participant

## Conclusion

In conclusion, in the analyzed sections of the *U.S. History* school textbook, observations on theme/rheme reveal the construction of women and their place in history as separate to the main historical narrative and a consistent reduction of women’s role as historical actors. These findings align with many discussions on women’s exclusion from conceptions of power and historical significance. These continuations even within a textbook claiming a “particular focus” on gender implies that the transformation of the traditional, un-nuanced construction of women’s historical roles is not an easy undertaking. Messages conveyed through school history textbooks are significant not only to serve as

academic knowledge but also “particular constructions of reality” and as reflections of “the values and aspirations of the society they represent” (Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011). For this reason, the way history is told is critical in shaping present-day views of society. These findings underscore the importance of further studies analyzing through a gender approach whose history is being taught in schools and in what ways we can work to broaden the scope of historical significance and deconstruct male-dominated narratives and historical perspectives, starting with broader analysis of more school history textbooks in a wider geographical and target-age context.

## References

- Chiponda, A., & Wassermann, J. (2011). Women in history textbooks: what message does this send to the youth?. *Yesterday and Today*, (6), 13-25.
- Clark, P. (2005). “A nice little wife to make things pleasant:’ Portrayals of Women in Canadian History Textbooks Approved in British Columbia. *McGill Journal of Education/Revue des sciences de l’éducation de McGill*, 40(2).
- Corbett, P.S., Janssen, V., Lund, J.M., Pfannenstiel, T., Waskiewicz, S., & Vickery, P. (2014). U.S. History. OpenStax.
- Gharbavi, Abdullah & Mousavi, Seyyed Ahmad. (2012). The Application of Functional Linguistics in Exposing Gender Bias in Iranian High School English Textbooks. *English Language and Literature Studies*. 2. 10.5539/ells.v2n1p85.
- Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, Christian M.C.M. (2014). *Halliday’s Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Fourth Edition. London and New York: Routledge.
- Leung, Ray. (2019). Analysis of the uk prime ministerial discourse on brexit: Thematic choices and their implications. *Discourse and Interaction*. 11. 45. 10.5817/DI2018-2-45.
- McCabe, Anne (2017). 2. In *An Introduction to Linguistics and Language Studies (Second Edition)* (p67). Sheffield: Equinox.
- Mee, T.S., & Seng, T.C. (2014). Whose Story? A Systemic Function Perspective on Mariah. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 134, 23-28. <https://doi-org.ezp.slu.edu/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.220>
- Moss, G. (2010). Textbook language, ideology and citizenship: The case of a history textbook in Colombia. *Functions of Language*, 17(1), 71-93.
- Muravyeva, MG. (2006). Shaping gender and national identity through Russian history textbooks on world history. *Yearbook of the International Society for Didactics of History 2005*, pp. 51-62.