

The Impacts of Gendered Rhetoric in United States Presidential Inaugural Addresses

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ABSTRACT

The custom of delivering an address on Inauguration Day in the United States started with the very first Inauguration of George Washington and has continued with almost every president since. Most Presidents use their Inaugural address to present their vision of America and to set forth their goals for the nation. Thus, with an ever-growing societal focus on equality and gender, I thought it would be interesting to look and see what the Presidents have had to say on gender equality, if they've discussed it at all, since they are the sole representation of the citizenry—. My research looked at the particular gendered rhetoric all of the presidents used in their Inaugural addresses, in conjunction with how each gendered term was used. Specifically, I used an online application for mixed methods research, Dedoose, to analyze each speech for gender specific pronouns, such as "he," "she," "man," and "woman." Additionally, I looked at how certain Presidents addressed (or chose not to) some of the most influential moments of gender equality, particularly prominent feminist movements. The outcomes of this study should provide a glimpse into some reasoning why almost a century after the big wave of civil liberty cases of the early 1900's, the issue of gender equality is still on the forefront of people's minds and is continually a rising problem.

Keywords: Gender, equality, Inaugural Addresses, United States Presidents, feminism.

INTRODUCTION

The president of the United States is often seen as the sole figure of representation of an entire nation of people. As citizens, we want to trust that our Commander-In-Chief is worried about the same things we are, reassured that those issues are the same for everyone, and will address these matters accordingly. When Patricia Arquette, in her Oscar acceptance speech for winning best supporting actress, said, "It's our time to have...equality once and for all, and equal rights for women in the United States of America,"¹ she used the lime-light to highlight an issue that's once again on the forefront of social issues today: gender equality. Thus with an ever-growing societal focus on equality and gender, I thought it would be interesting to look back and see what our current President and all of the past Presidents have had to say on gender equality, if they've discussed it at all, since they are the sole representation of the citizenry. I was hoping that the outcome of my study would provide a glimpse into some reasoning why almost a century after the big wave of civil liberty cases of the early 1900's, the issue of gender equality is still on the forefront of people's minds and is continually a rising problem.

METHODS

To narrow the scope of "gender equality," I chose to look at particular gendered rhetoric presidents used one of their first formal speeches to the American people as President: their Inaugural addresses. I read and combed through all 57 inaugural speeches specifically for gendered pronouns. I set up five binaries to look for: "he" and "she," "him" and "her," "his" and "hers," "man" and "woman," and "men" and "women."

Aiding in my research was Dedoose, which is an online application specifically used for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research (www.dedoose.com). Dedoose allowed me to create and write codes for those ten

¹Rullo, S. (2015, February 22). "Transcript Of Patricia Arquette's Oscar Acceptance Speech Shows Her Passionate Words About Gender Inequality." *Bustle*.

words I was researching. I was reading through all of the speeches, I tagged and coded every instance of those ten words. When I finished that process, Dedoose churned out tables of totals for me. The final data astonished me.

RESULTS

In total, I found 824 instances and uses of: he, she, him, her, his, hers, man, woman, men and women². That averages about 14 of the gendered terms, per inaugural address. But what’s far more interesting was the breakdown of the use of each particular word. The following table, “Gendered Terms Totals Breakdown,” and bar chart show the individual word use breakdown:

Table 1. Gendered Terms Totals Breakdown

Male Gendered Terms	Total Count	Female Gendered Terms	Total Count
He	103	She	12
Him	60	Her	48
His	205	Hers	0
Man	154	Woman	6
Men	210	Women	26

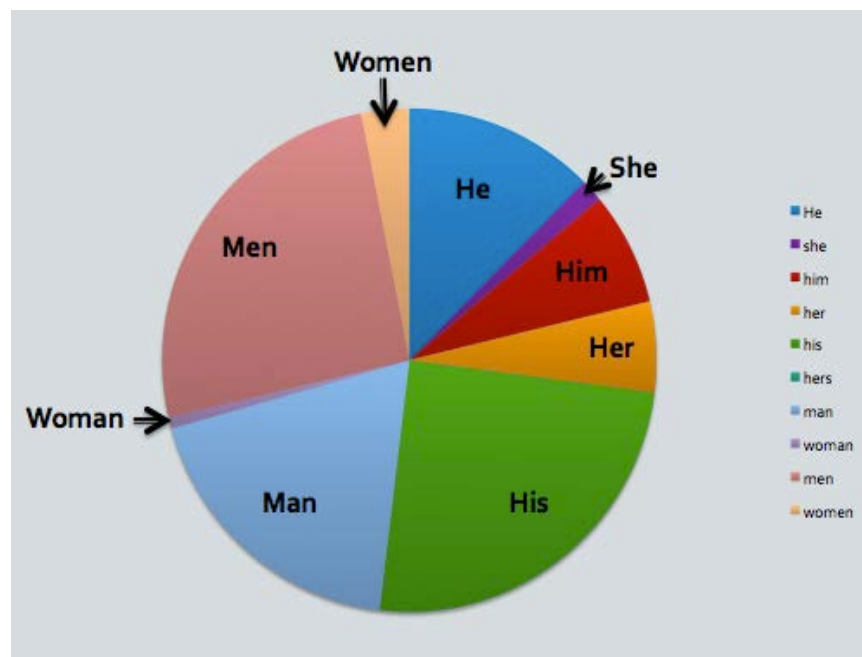


Figure 1. Gendered Terms Totals Pie Chart Breakdown

The total number of male terms was 732; the total number of female terms was 92. That breaks down to 88.8% and 11.2%. Roughly, one out of every ten gendered terms was female. ONE. And the table is correct in reporting no usages of “hers” whatsoever in any of the speeches. Those findings and statistics alone would have been a pretty compelling argument that highlighted the vast disparity between representations of the genders. But I kept looking and analyzing.

² Setting aside all possibilities of human error, 824 and all of the following numbers and statistics are going to be used firmly and absolutely, for argument’s sake.

The presidents used many variations of “man” or “men.” Some variations of the use of “man” include: spokes-, -kind, fellow-, bonds-, -hood, and Congress-. Some variations of the use of “men” include: Free-, States-, Country-, Fellow-, Working-, and Sea-. In fact many of the president’s, including Abraham Lincoln (1865), Calvin Coolidge (1925), and Lyndon Johnson (1965) chose to use the opening greeting of “My fellow Countrymen.” Some other instances include when Theodore Roosevelt (1905) said, “No weak nation that acts **manfully** and justly should ever have cause to fear us.” And when James Garfield (1881) said, “The colonists were struggling not only against the armies of a great nation, but against the settled opinions of **mankind**...” Of course with 364 instances of “man” and “men” alone, there’s no shortage of examples on those fronts.

What was much more compelling was the use of the female terms. “Her” is the most used female term, with a whopping 48 uses. Some examples of include: Franklin Roosevelt (1933) “Nature still offers **her** bounty and human efforts have multiplied it,” and William Harrison (1841) “...much resemble the 'recommendations' of Athens to **her** allies...” As I looked at more and more uses of “her,” I realized, with two exceptions, every use of “her” was not actually referring to a female human. Instead, “her” was used to describe: the roads and aqueducts of Rome, the country, republics, foreign relations, laws, armies, navies, territories, fertile soil, Athens, ports, frontiers, local institutions, resources, and nature. Notice that all of these things are in fact inanimate objects.

As for the two exceptions I mentioned, they both happened in the last decade. George W. Bush (2005) said, “By making every citizen an agent of *his or her* own destiny, we will give our fellow Americans greater freedom...” and Barak Obama (2013) said: “But the words I spoke today are not so different from the oath that is taken each time a soldier signs up for duty or an immigrant realizes **her** dream.” In the first exception, “her” was accompanied by “his,” so it wasn’t used referring solely to a female. So out of 48 usages of “her,” only once was it used to reference an actual female person. ONCE.

The uses of “she” followed a much similar pattern. Of its meager 12 instances, “she” was used to describe: the United States, Texas, legions, the republic, and America. Accounting for a third of the uses of “she” is the following quote from Obama (2013): “We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that **she** has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because **she** is an American; **she** is free and **she** is equal, not just in the eyes of God, but also in our own.” One president used “she” to reference an actual female person. ONE.

Considering “hers” was never used in any of the inaugural addresses, I’ll move to the uses of “women.” “Women” deviated from the pattern that “she” and “her” followed. In every instance it was used, it was referring to an actual female person. But before setting off any celebratory confetti cannons, there’s one fine print detail: every single use of “women” was preceded by “men and.” The term “women” never stood alone without “men.” This would seem to implicate a hierarchy where women are always to follow men and aren’t strong enough to stand without a male, alone.

In it’s measly six uses, “woman” followed the pattern of “women” half of the time. Three of the six instances were preceded by “man.” The other three uses were quite interesting. Warren Harding (1921) said, “With the nation-wide induction of **womanhood** into our political life, we may count upon **her** *intuitions*, **her** *refinements*, **her** *intelligence*, and **her** *influence* to exalt the social order.” Again, talking about a woman’s intuition, Calvin Coolidge (1925) said, “...here stands its Government...*attentive to the intuitive counsel of womanhood*, encouraging education...” And in the last use of “woman,” George Bush (1989) said, “But my thoughts have been turning the past few days to those who would be watching at home, to... the **woman** who will tell her sons the words of the battle hymns.”

These three quotes construct an interesting narrative about what exactly it means to be a woman. According to the Inaugural Addresses, if one is “woman,” one has to be refined, attentive, intuitive, educated, intelligent, and above all, a mother. Those are the only portrayals of a female. Perhaps this would be understandable for the presidents from the late 18th and early 19th centuries when the sole roles for females were domestic. But how can those be the only portrayals through the 20th and into the 21st centuries, especially as suffrage was gathering way? Or when the 19th Amendment was ratified? In the next portion of my paper, I’ll be looking at how the data I collected and analyzed can be put in conversation with historical gender equality movements.

Historical Gender Equality Movements

Many suffrage and feminist movements happened pre-1920 in the U.S., but they all led up to and culminated in the 19th Amendment being ratified in 1920. The historical 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. “The amendment reads: ‘The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex,’” (Iwamoto). A year after the 19th Amendment was ratified, Warren Harding gave his inaugural address. He opened his speech by saying: “When one surveys the world about **him** after the great storm, noting the marks of destruction and yet rejoicing in the ruggedness of the things which withstood it,

if **he** is an American **he** breathes the clarified atmosphere with a strange mingling of regret and new hope.” He uses three male gendered words in his very first sentence. He goes on, towards the middle of his speech, to say the quote I mentioned previously, about “the nation-wide induction of womanhood into our political life... her intuitions, her refinements, her intelligence, and her influence...” which is followed up by, “We count upon her exercise of the full privileges and the performance of the duties of citizenship to speed the attainment of the highest state.” And towards the end of his speech, he says: “We would not have an America living within and for **herself** alone, but we would have her self-reliant, independent, and ever nobler, stronger, and richer.”

Those three quotes, at the beginning, middle, and end of Harding’s speech construct very different narratives than what they’re saying. The placement of these gendered phrases are important. By that I mean, Harding seems to be acknowledging women by saying that they’ve been inducted into political life, and she is oh-so counted on! But in reality, he is perpetuating male dominance by starting his speech with “if he is an American he breathes...” insinuating that true Americans are male. No mention of “if she is an American,” what happens to her. In the middle, he does talk about equality, but then he asserts male dominance again by objectifying females— using “herself” in referring to America: a land mass, a thing, an inanimate object. So while many people heard or read his bit about womanhood and saw it as a step in the right direction towards equality, if they were to look a bit deeper, they’d see that the statement was embedded in a speech that exudes male superiority.

But Harding wasn’t the only president to send covert messages in his speech. The 1960s were a huge time for gender equality movements in the U.S. In 1963 Congress passed the Equal Pay Act, promising equitable wages for the same work regardless of sex, race, religion or national origin (Post and Courier). And in 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act passed, prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion or national origin (Post and Courier). Yet in his inaugural address in 1965, Lyndon Johnson addressed none of these huge moments. He talked about race issues, saying, “Justice requires us to remember: when any citizen denies **his** fellow, saying: ‘**His** color is not mine or **his** beliefs are strange and different,’ in that moment **he** betrays America, though his forebears created this Nation.” He also said, “America would be a place where each **man** could be proud to be himself: stretching **his** talents, rejoicing in **his** work, important in the life of **his** neighbors and **his** nation.” In two sentences, he affirmed that American citizens are proud, talented, working, *males*. In two sentences, he used eight male gendered terms. In fact, in his whole speech he used 27 male gendered words. That record was topped only five other times out of the 57 inaugural addresses ever given.

The only president who ever used female terms actually referring to females was Barack Obama. In 2009, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was signed into law. The federal law expands workers’ right to sue for pay discrimination and relaxes the statute of limitations on such suits (Iwamoto). And in 2013, Obama said:

We know that America thrives when every person can find independence and pride in their work; when the wages of honest labor liberate families from the brink of hardship. We are true to our creed when a little **girl** born into the bleakest poverty knows that **she** has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because **she** is an American; **she** is free and **she** is equal, not just in the eyes of God, but also in our own.

This is a big step in the right direction for gender equality. Not only is Obama the first president to use female terms actually referring to female people, but he’s also the only one to use a female in a narrative as the embodiment of the citizenry: “she is an American.” However, even Obama, the president that treated men and women the most equally, still used 14 male terms to 11 female terms.

If the Presidents objectify females, and so minimally include them in their Inaugural addresses, why should they have faith that the Presidents will advocate for them? In his article “The Misconceived Quest for the Original Understanding,” Paul Brest presents his readers with a similar conundrum. He asked readers to ponder why blacks and women should abide by the Constitution. After all, none of the framers and founders were black or women. The Constitution considered a black man three-fifths of a person, and it didn’t consider women at all. After many explanations, his conclusion was that because the Constitution is the Law of the land, and we live on the land, we should abide by it. Perhaps not the most compelling argument one could make, but it was still an interesting concept to ponder.

The same principle could thus apply to women and presidential inaugural addresses. Why should women look to any President with respect and faith that they will advocate for all citizenry, not just male citizenry? Certainly the past presidents track record (only considering inaugural addresses in this situation) does not favor them—they’re outweighed 9:1 male to female. While Brest doesn’t give an exact answer to this scenario, if we extrapolate his argument and apply it to this situation, we can postulate that he would likely give a similar conclusion: because the President of the United States is the Commander in Chief, we as citizens should trust in them.

That answer is still pretty unsatisfactory because, “simply because” does not solve the raging inequality. If the language doesn’t include females, why should they be expected to abide by documents, speeches, and people who don’t consider women people? As exemplified by President Harding, President Johnson, and essentially every single president— for they all contributed to the vast disparity of 92 to 732 female to male terms used— there can be claims of equality and inclusiveness, and it can sound persuasive and be compelling, but the reality is that women were (with few exceptions) absent in their speeches. And I can say this with conviction because at best, just over a third of the female terms used were used referring to actual female people³. The rest were referring to inanimate *objects*. 40 out of 824 gendered terms used in total out of every U.S. Presidential Inaugural Address ever given, were talking about female people. 4.9%.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps this inexplicable disparity is one of the links in a chain of reasons why the issue of gender equality is still on the forefront of people’s minds and is a continuing problem. But if the data, statistics, and analyses still aren’t a convincing argument, at least take away the fact that rhetoric is important; don’t just take sweeping rhetoric at its face value. Word choice can have a powerful effect on all bodies of writing, including speeches. And as we’ve seen by the subverted equalizing efforts (intentionally and unintentionally) used by every single President in their Inaugural Address, language can have huge consequences.

LIMITATIONS

Since this is such a specific study, not much prior research has been done in this particular area. So this study lays some groundwork. As such a new field of research, there are going to be further inquiries and working out of some minor issues (things that I perhaps didn’t think of in the initial round of research). Though I think the data and analysis would still yield very similar results and be equally as compelling, I would be remiss to not mention the aspect of human or technological error. As I mentioned in a footnote in the main section of the paper, it is possible I made a human error in the coding or other step in the research, and it’s also possible that Dedoose computed something wrong or made some errors. Additionally, I only looked at ten gendered terms. Like I said, with this being a relatively un-researched, specific genre, there’s plenty of room for future research. Perhaps there’s more to say in looking at all gendered terms used, or defining new parameters for a more complete, compelling case of gender discrimination in the U.S. Presidential Inaugural Addresses.

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³ The 28 “women” + 2 “her” exceptions” + 4 “she” usages by Obama + 3 “woman” = 37
37/92=.40 → 40%

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