

Smoothing processes in the United-Nations' discourse on violence against women: a diachronic perspective

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Political discourse: new approaches to new challenges? March 7-8, 2022

Introduction

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PhD thesis project → the evolution of UN discourse on violence against women from a linguistic point of view since the 1995 Beijing conference

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Created and compiled → a computerised corpus of UN texts

- 5.5million words
- press releases and reports on violence against women
- published between 1996 and 2019
- English and French

Smoothing processes = processes that enable a writer/speaker to make their discourse more neutral, less controversial by mitigating or not mentioning standpoints that could be considered excessive

processus de « lissage énonciatif » (Oger et Ollivier-Yaniv, 2006 : 64)

aplatissement de la dimension argumentative contribuant à la neutralisation d'un discours dépourvu de toute dimension conflictuelle » (Cussò et Gobin, 2008 : 8; Raus, 2017 : 95)

différents procédés de neutralisation et de « dépolitisation » [qui] [...] se doublent d'un lissage énonciatif qui atténue ou passe sous silence certaines positions jugées excessives (Née, Oger & Sitri, 2017 : 16)

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Theoretical framework and method

1. Corpus-based discourse analysis

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- a corpus is a large body of language “designed for a particular research project” (Baker, 2006: 147).
- offer analysts a high degree of objectivity (Stubbs, 1994: 202-218; Hardt Mautner, 1995: 3; Baker et al, 2008: 277) and the possibility to reveal linguistic phenomena otherwise undetectable (Sinclair, 1991: 100; Partington et al., 2013: 11)
- 2000's: foundation of school of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (University of Bologna) → many discourse analysts made use of corpora to better understand discourse, especially those interested in political discourse, because of the importance of language in politics (Partington, 2013)

- “since only text is directly available, this is the basic data for corpus linguistics” (Stubbs, 2007: 144) → text-to-discourse analysis
- discourse =
every utterance or written sentence always has a context, is always in some sense referring to something already said and inviting a response, is always designed to do something to somebody, a reader or a listener (Lodge, 2008 in Partington et al., 2013: 31)

Theoretical framework and method

2. Textometric tools

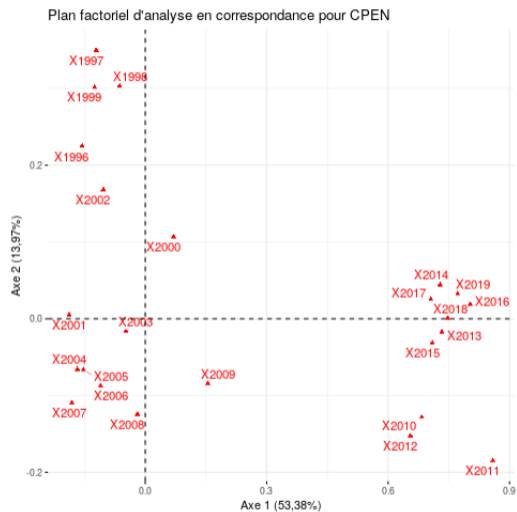
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2. Textometric tools

Lexicometric and textometric tools were designed (eg Lexico 3, Lexico 5, TXM) in France in the 1990's and 2000's (Salem, 1993) and used to analyse political discourse (Labbé, 1990, Labbé & Labbé 2006; Mayaffre & Poudat, 2013).

Such tools have 3 different types of functions (Leblanc, 2017: 35)

- **documentary functions:** display the contexts in which words or sequences of words are used
- **statistical functions:** specificity scores = how specific a word is in a part of the corpus. Positive value associated with high degree of specificity, while negative value indicates lower degree / word not used as frequently as in other parts of the corpus
- **multidimensional analysis:** Correspondance Analysis (CA) = produces graphical representation of a dataset that highlights oppositions and correlations in the data



- CA: identification of trends, ie lexis used in texts published between 1996-2009 very different from that used in the 2010's + which words were specific to each period of time
- observation of contexts in which these words are used
- investigation of historical context, intertextuality (Dufour & Rosier, 2012, in Raus, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2015)

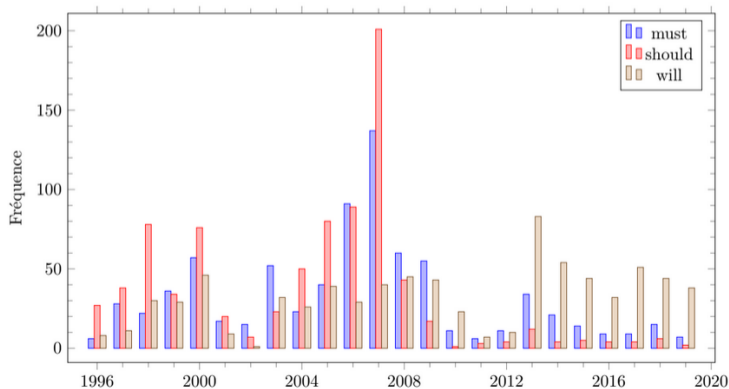
Discursive smoothing through modality in the 2010's: the end of the golden age of human rights?

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- (1) Moroccans **should** take a sincere, fair approach to this referendum as it was taking place under the auspices of the United-Nations. (1998)
- (2) The [chilean] Government **must** protect women. (1999)
- (3) States **must** ensure that the perpetrators of such crimes were punished. (2007)
- (4) Les États **doivent** adapter leur législation en y incorporant les clauses du droit international relatives aux droits de l'homme, au droit humanitaire et au droit pénal. (2004)

- (5) We declare that we **will** prosecute crimes against women. (2013)
- (6) funds **will** be used to address violence. (2015)
- (7) We **will** not relent until we stop all attacks against women and girls. (2015)
- (8) Il **faudra** pour cela protéger les femmes et les filles migrantes contre la violence et l'exploitation à toutes les étapes de la migration, tout en favorisant leurs capacités d'action et leur esprit d'initiative.

Why this shift, and why in the 2010's specifically?

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 - 2006: dissolution of UN's Human Rights Commission considered illegitimate because of its Libyan presidency
 - 2018: *Serions-nous aujourd'hui capables, en tant qu'assemblée des nations, d'approuver, comme en 1948, la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme ? Je n'en suis pas si sûre. (Angela Merkel)*

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 - 2012: Israel refused to be reviewed by the Human Rights Council (Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights)
 - 2018: the USA decided to leave the Human Rights Council because of criticism on their immigration policy. American ambassador Nikki Haley called the Council a “cesspool of bias” and “so-called Human Rights Council”

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Disappearance of <name of State + should/must> and frequent use of <We/I + will> in the 2010's = **politeness/diplomacy** (Brown & Levinson in Jarowski & Coupland, 1999; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1995)

- 'polite' > polir (FR) meaning to polish = make sth smoother, smooth the rough edges so that it does not hurt
- saying that some States should or must do sth = a threat to their 'negative face' = perceived as attempt to limit their freedom of action

Smoothing the meaning of a feminist term

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- term *femicide* → used for the first time by a feminist activist, Diana Russell. **1976**. during the **International Tribunal on Crimes against Women**
- aim of the Tribunal → to show that women were subjected to the same acts of violence. all over the world, that most murders of women were not isolated cases, but that they reflected the **systemic violence** women have to go through all over the world (Horton, 1976 : 83)

why was the term *femicide* introduced?

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naming into existence / nommer pour exister [...] il était important de dénommer le féminicide [...] afin de le rendre visible. [...] « la qualification du féminicide comme un type d'homicide a pour objectif de donner une visibilité aux crimes pratiqués contre les femmes ». [...](Machado, 2019)

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pour compter [les violences faites aux femmes] il faut les dire, et pour les dire il faut les nommer (Enveff survey, 2001 : 20).

*We must realize that a lot of homicide is in fact femicide. We must recognize the sexual politics of murder. From the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for “honor,” we realize that femicide has been going on a long time. But since it involves mere females, **there was no name for it until [...] the word “femicide”** (Russell, 2011).*

Meaning of *femicide* only became more → *the misogynistic killing of women by*
controversial *men (Radford et Russell 1992, 3; Rus-*
sell 2011)

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Men tell us not to take a morbid interest in these atrocities. [...] The murder and mutilation of a woman is not considered a political crime (event). Men tell us that they cannot be blamed for what a few maniacs do. Yet the very process of denying the political content of the terror helps to perpetuate it, keeps us weak, vulnerable, and fearful (Russell, 2012).

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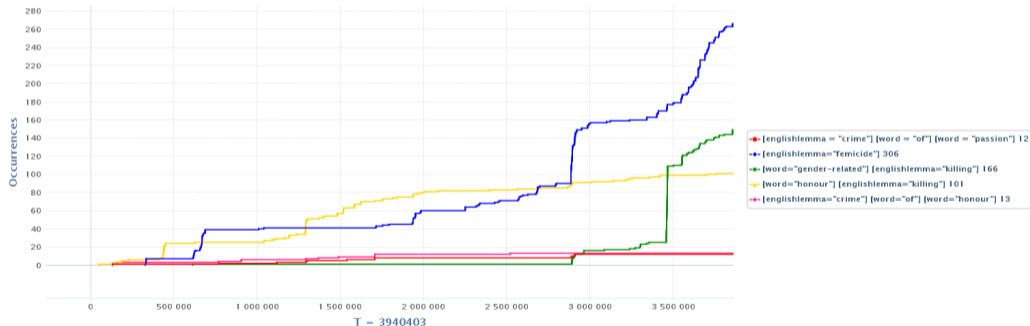
- some feminists (eg Lagarde, Mexico) added the notion of State complicity to the definition

- considered incompatible with the principle of equality before the law

Le principe d'égalité devant la loi s'oppose à ce que les crimes soient « genrés » (Céline Parisot, présidente de l'Union syndicale des magistrats, 2019)

the term made its way into the UN's discourse
 significant increase in its use, especially in the 2010's

Progression de [englishlemma = "crime"] [word = "of"] [word = "passion"], [englishlemma="femicide"], [word="gender-related"] [englishlemma="killing"], [word="honour"] [englishlemma="killing"], [englishlemma="crime"] [word="of"] [word="honour"] dans ALL-EN



How did it happen?

- influence of feminists eg Diana Russell since the 1990's
- circulation of the term in several countries (USA, Latin America, Europe)
- adoption of laws on femicide in the 2000's eg Spain
- preoccupying and disturbing increase in systematic murders of women in the second half of the 2000's eg Mexico-USA border, Guatemala

2012 →

- WHO officially recognized the term and provided a definition
- a UN Symposium on femicide was organized + definition of femicide and its recognition as a human rights violation
- Diana Russell's speech on this occasion in which she defended her definition of the term femicide
- 150 persons signed the *Vienna Declaration on femicide*

We, the participants of the Vienna Symposium on Femicide, held on 26 November 2012 at the United Nations Office at Vienna, Alarmed by the fact that femicide is increasing all over the world and often remains unpunished, which not only intensifies the subordination and powerlessness of women and girls, but also sends the negative message to society that violence against females may be both acceptable and inevitable, Recognizing that femicide is the killing of women and girls because of their gender [...] (Vienna Declaration on femicide, 2012).

2013-2016 →

- adoption of more laws on femicide eg Argentina, Bolivia, Italy
- inclusion of femicide in the Penal Code in some countries eg Brasil

1. femicide was added to the UN's terminological database
but the UN's definition does not mention misogyny or men
= smoothing

*the generally accepted definition of femicide is **the gender-related killing of a woman or women or a girl or girls**. The term derives from homicide, adding the nuance of a crime specifically affecting women and girls.*

*The term feminicide is more often understood to have a the wider implication of **State complicitness in the impunity surrounding crimes perpetrated against women and girls**, such as in a lack of response in such cases or the failure to fulfill its international obligations, including the duty to investigate and punish **perpetrators**.*

Homicide d'une femme, d'une jeune fille ou d'une enfant en raison de son sexe. Le féminicide peut désigner un meurtre à caractère individuel ou systématique.

2. observation of *femicide* in my corpus:

homicide of which the victim is a woman, homicide/femicide sometimes used interchangeably

*Studies have shown that in some countries between 40 and 70 per cent of female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner. South Africa is among those countries, making it one of the countries with **the highest femicide rate**. A 2009 national study showed that homicide was declining, that there was a reduction in **female homicide**, but that the reduction was lesser among **intimate partner femicides** while “**rape homicides**” had proportionately increased. (2016)*

*Further improve the collection of comparable data on **gender-related killings of women or femicides** by setting up at the federal level a system charged with collecting data from all jurisdictions; (b) Consider expanding the mandate of homicide panels to **homicide / femicide panels** or establishing or designating other bodies to perform such a role [...]. (2018)*

Conclusion

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- smoothing processes could be identified in UN discourse on violence against women using a textometric tool, TXM
- 2 different types of smoothing processes were observed: smoothing of the meaning of a feminist term / shift of modality from deontic to epistemic modality in the 2010's
- why? a question of diplomacy and legitimacy
- why 2010? end of the golden age of human rights, rise of anti-universalism

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