

Language and Gender in Susan Glaspell's *Trifle* (1916)

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Abstract:

Trifles is a one-act play that premiered in 1916, which discusses social construction of women in a male-dominated society in the 1980s. It reflects patriarchal oppression exercised against women in an era that belittles women's right of independence and freedom. This paper puts into focus the submissive gender roles of women, paying special attention to the relationship between language and gender as major elements in forming female identity. This paper provides an analysis of the play which is inspired by sociolinguistics, language and gender, dealing with language as a social phenomenon that reflects differing uses of language based on individuals' gender differences. First, this paper will deal with the discussion of the relationship between gender and language in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. Second, it will explore the linguistic features used by women that reveal the oppressive gender roles of women at that time. It will shed light on gender differences in language use which perpetuate the subjugation of women.

Key Words:

Glaspell, language, gender, sociolinguistics, power.

اللغة والنوع فى مسرحية "تفاهات" (١٩١٦) لسوزان جلاسل

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ملخص:

عرضت مسرحية *Trifles* / "تفاهات" والمكونة من فصل واحد لأول مرة في عام ١٩١٦. تناقش المسرحية صورة المرأة في مجتمع يهيمن عليه الذكور في الثمانينيات، كما تعكس ايضا القمع الأبوي الذي يمارس ضد المرأة في عصر يقلل من حق المرأة في الاستقلال والحرية. يركز هذا البحث على الأدوار الاجتماعية و الإستسلامية للمرأة، ويولي أهتمام خاص للعلاقة بين اللغة ونوع الجنس كعناصر رئيسية في تكوين الهوية الأنثوية. يقدم البحث تحليلاً للمسرحية مستوحى من العلاقة بين علم اللغة الاجتماعي واللغة ونوع الجنس، حيث يتعامل مع اللغة كظاهرة اجتماعية تعكس الاستخدامات المختلفة لها بناءً على الفروق بين الجنسين. أولاً، يناقش البحث العلاقة بين الجنس واللغة في مسرحية "تفاهات" لسوزان جلاسل. ثانياً، يدرس البحث السمات اللغوية التي تستخدمها النساء والتي تكشف عن الأدوار القمعية للمرأة في ذلك الوقت، كما يلقي الضوء على الفروق بين الجنسين في استخدام اللغة التي تديم استعباد المرأة.

كلمات مفتاحية: جلاسل، اللغة، النوع، علم اللغة الاجتماعي، السلطة.

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Introduction:

Trifles is a one-act play that premiered in 1916. It discusses social construction of women in a male-dominated society in the 1980s. It reflects patriarchal oppression exercised against women in an era that patronizes and belittles women's right of independence and freedom. It also puts into focus female response to oppression and cruelty, suggesting that cruelty can stimulate passive persons to commit aggressive actions. This paper puts into focus the social constructions of women, drawing special attention to the relationship between language and gender, as they are major elements in forming female identity. The social construction of women reflects their experience of different conditions and social power structures. The play reveals the interconnection of the setting (rural farm in the Midwest), and customs that favor men on behalf of women.

Trifles is a criticism of the social system that perpetuates male domination and female subjugation. The play is based on a true story that happened in the state of Iowa in 1900, while Glaspell was working as a reporter for *Des Moines Daily News* (Shih 243). This crime/ detective drama deals with the murder of John Wright, and the suspect is his wife Minnie Foster Wright. Country Attorney, a Sheriff, Mr. Hale a neighboring farmer, Minnie's friend and the Sheriff's wife were in the crime scene to investigate the case and collect personal belongings for Minnie who stays in jail. The two women manage to find the evidence because of their sympathetic attitude toward Minnie, while men fail because of their sexist attitude and demeaning opinion of women's capabilities.

The play highlights gender differences regarding females' social roles and use of language. This is quite apparent in men and women's perception of gender differences, social roles, behaviors

and motivations. Women's ability to decipher the significance of the clues available in the crime scene and their decision to hide the truth reveal the inability of male-centered judicial system to perceive that their impaired biased judgment weakens their chances to see the clues that indict John Wright rather than Minnie. The playwright uses the setting of the play to convey a certain feeling of gloominess and emptiness that are all over the place. For example, the gloomy kitchen, the unbaked bread, the unwashed pans and the uncompleted quilt portray a feeling of incompleteness.

Trifles has received critical attention from different scholars. Published studies include some research papers and scholarly essays. Latifa Ismael Jabboury's paper, "The Significance of Symbolism in Conveying the Feminist Perspective in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*" (2007), deals with the importance of symbolism to the theme of feminism in the play. Yi-chin Shih's article, "Place and Gender in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and *Woman's Honor*" (2013), explores the relationship between place and gender in Glaspell's work. Miriam López Rodríguez' essay, "Reading Minnie's Quilt: Decoding Domestic Material Culture in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*" (2002), investigates the significance of symbolic implications in reading *Trifles*. Carme Manuel's article, "Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916): Women's Conspiracy of Silence Beyond the Melodrama of Beset Womanhood" (2000), puts into focus women's muted rebellion against patriarchal structures of society. Dwi Anggara Asianti's article, "Women Power to End the Oppressions of Patriarchy in Susan Glaspell's Play 'Trifles'" (2012), explores patriarchal oppression and women's power to end it.

This paper provides an analysis of the play which is inspired by sociolinguistics, language and gender differences which deal with language as a social phenomenon and its relation to individuals' gender differences. First, this paper will discuss the relationship between gender and language in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. Second, it will explore the linguistic features used by women that reveal the social position of women at that time. It

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examines gender differences in language, which highlight oppressive gender roles against women. The paper intends to answer the following questions: are there differences between women's and men's use of language? What is the significance of these differences? Do these differences reflect cultural bias against women?

Language plays an important role in social life as a means of social communication. It is used to represent or judge individual's social behavior, background, intentions and character. Walt Wolfram states:

Language is one of the most powerful emblems of social behavior. In the normal transfer of information through language, we use language to send vital social messages about who we are, where we come from, and who we associate with. It is often shocking to realize how extensively we may judge a person's background, character, and intentions based simply upon the person's language, dialect, or, in some instances, even the choice of a single word.

Language can tell a lot about a person's motivation, social role and behavior, and how he/she values his/her position in the society. Therefore, sociolinguistics grows to be an important field of study, which explores the relationship between cultural influences and language. Sociolinguistics "is the study of our everyday lives—how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language" (Wardhaugh & Fuller 1). It includes different cultural factors that affect individual's use of language or choice of certain words. It could be used to explore individual's cultural background and behavior. Since language represents social behavior, it is understandable that it affects social relationships; international, national, interpersonal relationships. Likewise, language is influenced by social interactions or situations. For example,

special language varieties arise when speakers from mutually unintelligible language groups need a common

language for communication. Throughout the world, there are many sociohistorical situations that have resulted in these specialized language situations—in the Caribbean, Africa, South America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands” (Wolfram).

Language use is another approach that deals with language as a social activity. This approach normally concentrates on the social context. Here, the position of the speaker or the addressee dictates or defines the use of certain vocabulary or sentence structure. There may be some social rules that are used to conduct a conversation. Cultural backgrounds, the purpose of social contact and assigned gender roles are also important. Since males and females are assigned different gender roles in society, they use language differently. As they are subject to different social/power situations and have different experiences, they use linguistic details/features (language forms) that are different. Thus, the values and attitudes of the society toward both sexes influence individuals’ behaviors.

Sociolinguistics concentrates on the actual use of language not the speakers or their linguistic competence. According to Labov, who has significant contributions in sociolinguistics, “the linguistic behavior of individuals cannot be understood without knowledge of the communities that they belong to” (qtd. in Wardhaugh & Fuller 4). Sociolinguistics is not concerned with people’s use of grammar or the formation of sentences, but it pays special attention to what is called “communicative competence, and the social aspects of that competence” (5). Language should be studied in addition to performance to gain data about how people use it to communicate and how their identities are shaped as individuals or as part of groups. Power, which plays an important role in this respect, is defined as “the ability to control events in order to achieve one’s aims” (8). Power is an ever-present phenomenon; however, it always instigates resistance “through words as well as deeds” (8). The effect of power is more tangible in social relationships and in forming social identities. As a social phenomenon, power is perceived when powerful participants

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manipulate different methods in social interaction like choosing the topic of the speech and restricting less powerful participants' contributions by utilizing various techniques such as interruptions or overlap.

As a social construction and self-image, Gender defines individual's category, role and behavior in the society. It examines the construction of gendered relations that are affected by power relations in society. Gender differences in language mean "men and women show significant differences in the characteristics when using the same language or dialect, and they usually form variations of gender" (Jinyu). The study of language and gender goes back to second-wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s (Hall et al. 1). It sheds light on women's and men's differential use of language. In Lakoff's article, "Language and Woman's Place" (1973), she deals with the influence of a patriarchal system on women's and men's speech, which deemed women's language as inferior. Women who adopt the imposed language features are marginalized and trivialized. Lakoff traces some language features that are used by women such as colors, particles and tag questions which indicate indecisiveness and triviality. Likewise, the American feminist Robin Morgan argues, "The very semantics of the language reflect [women's] condition. We do not even have our own names, but bear that of the father until we exchange it for that of the husband" (qtd. in Sunderland 10). Some lexical items such as 'Mrs./Miss', 'son-of-a-bitch' and 'manageress' are used in the English language to "define, degrade and stereotype' women...to render them invisible" (10-11).

Accordingly, the names of the characters have symbolic connotations in the play. They reveal characters' attitude toward social rights and family life. For example, Mr. Wright's name represents his absolute right to dominate the family life, as he is always right. He is described as a traditional farmer who works in the family farm. He is known as a good man who does not drink and pays his debts in time. He isolates himself and his wife from others. He kills Minnie's canary. because he likes silence. Minnie's name represents her inferior status as a housewife and a woman in

a male-dominated society. Additionally, the other women in the play are identified by their husbands' names, which suggest that the society deprives women from having an independent identity that define their social roles as noteworthy members of the society.

Tannen believes that the misunderstandings between women and men are derived from gendered subcultures which lead to obtaining disparate communication styles. Tannen suggests that women's and men's speech is the result of gendered subcultures which direct boys to competitive relationships and girls to collaborative ones (Hall et al. 2). She suggests that these differences are separate but equal. The differences between women and men's use of language are rendered to childhood practices/activities or divergent communicative styles. Hall believes, "Early models of language and gender, particularly Tannen's two-cultures model, viewed linguistic differences between women and men as originating in distinct childhood socialization practices in which girls and boys acquire differing communicative styles" (4). Thus, girls' and boys' differing linguistic styles are not the result of two cultures, but they are a byproduct of shared linguistic repertoire that creates linguistic styles that could be used in cross-sex interaction.

Gender differences between males and females could reflect different attitudes and experiences. It is also related to their position in social power relations, as males tend to occupy dominant roles thanks to prevailing gender roles, cultural background and social background. Therefore, women and men use language differently. Women use language/talking as a method of communicating emotionally, while men consider talking a competitive activity. Women tend to build relationships with others and avoid conflicts, while men are direct and assertive. Accordingly, gender does not directly affect language use, but it influences individuals' identities, social status, and habitual activities. Gender influences

linguistic behavior because of its impact on other things that influence linguistic behavior more directly. The way people use language can be related to the social network they

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belong to, their habitual activities, their identities as particular kinds of people and their status relative to others. Each of these things is potentially affected by gender divisions which are characteristics of our society. (Çakici 465)

Throughout the play, women are positioned as subjects and are judged as inferior members in the society. Therefore, their existence and opinions are trivialized throughout their conversation with men. This subjugating status of women is reflected on their discourse. Their language is indirect, uncertain and passive; therefore, their language is ridiculed. According to men, women should care for trifles, because they do not have the needed skills or intelligence to solve the crime.

Another feature of gender differences is women and men's familiarity with and access to power. Women are always mistrusted to hold or pursue power. For example, women who seek power are deemed dangerous or strange. Therefore, women are excluded from powerful positions in public and private spheres. It is commonly believed that "men are more comfortable with power than are women; that it is right and natural for men to seek and hold power; that for a woman to do so is strange, marking her as un-feminine and dangerous. This belief allows a culture to exclude women from full participation in any of its politics" (Lakoff, "Language, Gender, and politics" 161). Some believe that the relationship of language, gender and power is based on the perspective of "difference" as illustrated by Deborah Tannen (1990). However, women and men's behavior toward power is not related to gender but to "power" (161).

As women and men with power are perceived differently, language is used to reflect their various social stereotypes. Lakoff maintains, "To cite just a few examples, there are lexical differences in the way we talk about men with power, versus women with power. For example, we use different words to describe similar or identical behavior by men and by women." ("Language, Gender, and politics" 162). For example, words such as "bitch" or "shrew" are used to refer to women who have power,

while there are no equivalent words for men. There are words like “henpecked” and “pussy whipped” that are used to refer to men who do not dominate, but there are no equivalents for women. Negative words are used to describe women with power, as they are denied the chance to gain or assume power in a male-dominated society. Meanwhile, men who cannot dominate are condemned and ridiculed. Many proverbs and folktales warn women against decisiveness while assuring the importance of obedience and submissiveness such as the fairy tale “Seven at a Blow” which encourages males’ verbal assertion that brings success. The fairy tales “The Seven Swans” describes a girl’s success to save her brothers’ from a spell by sewing them shirts out of daisies. The story underlines females’ subjection and obedience (162). Proverbs and fairy tales form differing expectations regarding males and females’ directness in speech. While men are expected to be direct, females are expected to be indirect, which is condemned as indecisive or unfocused.

Regarding the role of gender in conversational dominance, studies show that men hold the floor for 80% of the time of conversations. Moreover, they maintain such dominance by interrupting women’s contributions (Lakoff, “Language, Gender, and politics” 162). Men are not expected to express grief, while women are not allowed to express their anger or use swear words. It is believed that “the expression of sorrow is an expression of powerlessness and helplessness; anger, of potency. So although these rules may seem to equalize the sexes, in fact they intensify male power and female powerlessness” (163).

According to Norman Fairclough, language is “a part of society; linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of special sort, and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena” (23). Accordingly, discourse is perceived to be “a place where relations of power are actually exercised and enacted” (43). Power in discourse means controlling and restricting the speech of non-powerful participants by powerful participants. Fairclough distinguishes among three types of constraints which include “contents,” “relations” or social relationships among participants,

“subjects” or the position participants occupy in the discourse (46). The three constraints are connected and can occur together.

Throughout the play, the women are required to respond to the questions of the attorney about Minnie and her husband. The relations refer to the women's subordinate relationship to the men, while the “subjects” refer to the position of the domineering male characters and subservient female characters. The restrictions imposed upon females' discourse entail using certain linguistic forms. For example, the attorney's questions suggest that he has the right to ask questions or impose the law, while the women have the obligation to conform and answer his questions, which assert the subordinate relation of the women to him. As a result of unequal power relationships, he is directly controlling the characters, because he enjoys the privilege of powerful participants who determine the type of discourse that may be drawn upon. The attorney is not only restricting/limiting the women's contributions, but he is also selecting the type of discourse. His frequent interruptions of women's speech are an attempt to control their conversation and hold the ground when he appears on the stage with the other men. Although the women are not really able to operate within these restrictions on valid/legitimate discourse imposed by the attorney, they managed to speak freely and flout these rules in his absence. However, he now and then asserts the power he has over the characters by giving orders or interrupting the speech.

Furthermore, there are situations when the attorney challenges the women's answer on his questions regarding Minnie's lack of the traits of a good housekeeper such as his remark about the cleanliness of the kitchen and the towels: “Here's a nice mess” (Glaspell, 982). He exceeds his discourse right when he accuses Mrs. Hale of being biased to her sex, as she explains that Minnie does not live alone and Wright is responsible for dirtying the towels. Mrs. Hale argues, “Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be”. She insinuates that Mr. Wright makes Minnie's cleaning mission difficult, which suggests his disrespect of her efforts. The attorney

replies, "Ah, loyal to your sex, I see" (982). The attorney maintains control throughout the discussion, as most of the questions are asked by him and are answered acquiescently by the women. The whole conversation represents the women's struggle to defend Minnie and their whole sex against men's prejudice. Therefore, Mrs. Hale asserts that they do not know who committed the crime to put themselves beyond suspicion. This discourse is a part of social struggle between males and females which is based on deeply situated beliefs that women are inferior.

Through the characters' language, the play deals with unequal distribution of power in the society. Power, here, does not mean the use of physical force, but it means employing detrimental actions that restrict women's autonomy. The existence of oppressive power structure incites resistance. However, the power of knowledge is used here to stand against patriarchal oppression in this case. The knowledge that is gained by women is the result of a logical debate based on factual evidence, shared experiences and some guessing. The guessing part makes use of women's prior knowledge of Minnie and her husband and past experiences of male dominance. Gaining this insight builds upon females' emotional side and stresses the fact that they are unique in their own way.

During women's discussion of the evidence, the reader has a comprehensive account of the motivation of the murder and the nature of the life of the murderess. Taking into account the oppressive marriage life and the depressive atmosphere of the house, the reader is positioned as a judge who should use available information to reach a verdict or identify him/herself with the women's action in favor of Minnie. Glaspell uses men's sarcastic remarks of women to portray the stress that motivates women to cover the traces of the crime and sympathize with Minnie. Belittling women's abilities by making fun of their language motivates them to abstain from sharing the information after discovering the truth. Therefore, female bonding and the power of knowledge are used to defy males' haughtiness.

Gender differences in language use include lexicon, syntax and pragmatics. There are different views that deem males' language

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as superior, while female language is inferior and indecisive. Lakoff suggests that this understanding depends on females' attitude toward themselves as marginal subjects in life which is appropriated by males. Females' powerlessness is reflected in their way of speaking and the way males speaks of them. Females are generally good at listening and sharing their emotions with others. Lakoff argues:

In appropriate women's speech, strong expression of feeling is avoided, expression of uncertainty is favored, and means of expression in regard to subject-matter deemed 'trivial' to the 'real' world are elaborated. Speech about women implies an object, whose sexual nature requires euphemism, and whose social roles are derivative and dependent in relation to men. ("Language and Women's Place" 45)

Women's language is judged inferior, as it is described according to men's rules. Since women's language is deemed trivial and their social roles are dictated by men, women's linguistic identity is hidden. The nature of gendered use of language reveals social discrimination between both sexes. For example, girls are scolded for using rough language like boys. Therefore, they acquire a style of speech that restrict them later in an inferior position and affect their ability to express themselves (47). Whether females acquire women's language or not, they are restricted in a demeaning position and are described later as trivial.

When men talk about women, they often identify them by their husbands' names. This asserts their dependence and inability to achieve autonomy. Lakoff believes, "In every aspect of life, a woman is identified in terms of the man she relates to. The opposite is not usually true of men: they act in the world as autonomous individuals, but women are only 'John's wife', or 'Harry's girlfriend'" ("Language and Women's Place" 65). Thus, women are identified by their relationship to men. After marriage, women give up their first and last names, as they turn into a mere possession of their husbands. Lakoff adds, "woman is her husband's possession, having no other identity than that of his wife" (73).

Throughout the play, women and men show differences in language use regarding the choice and frequency of lexical items. There are different examples of lexical differences which are manifest

during characters' discussion of the murder and the reasons behind the crime. While men talk about the reasons of the crime and the possible suspect, women are talking about the stove, knitting the quilt, and preservation jars. Mrs. Peters wonders:

(to the other woman) Oh, her fruit; it did freeze, *(to the LAWYER)* She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

SHERIFF: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE: Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.

[The two women move a little closer together.] (982)

Men find women's discussion of details trivial because they consider such argument irrelevant to the investigation and irrelevant to men's world or outside the world of their work. Since women are not entitled or expected to take a decision on the case, they are assigned unimportant decisions such as collecting the murderess things. This trivialization of women's roles reflects social discrimination against them. Because of males' discrimination against women, they reach the verdict that the husband deserves to be killed. Women and men's differing use of language shows out inequity in the treatment of men and women in the society and its expectations of them. Men are allowed to use powerful language to express emotions, while women are prevented from showing their anger during men's presence. Therefore, Mrs. Hale resorts to expressing her angry feelings about men's sarcastic remarks and interference in women's issues in private with her Mrs. Peters. Since they are not the favored group, and they are out of power, their language is always ridiculed and deemed feminine.

Relations of power are quite apparent in social interactions. Due to unequal distribution of power in the society, dominant individuals are able to coerce or affect the lives of others. Men tend to use the power ascribed to them by the society in conversational interactions with women. Sex roles differences are displayed in language features that are used by women and men in social interaction. Zimmerman and West suggest that men's power and dominance "are exercised in their conversational interaction with

women” (105). Their study makes use of turn-taking mechanism that governs both sexes’ contributions and reveals prominent distinctions between women’s and men’s “patterns of interruption, silence, and support for partner in the development of topics” (106).

The play reveals instances of speech overlap and interruptions. In order to classify these events, the study makes use of Zimmerman and West’s definitions of these terms. Their model is used to locate the significance of interaction problems throughout the play. They distinguish between overlaps and interruptions. They argue:

overlaps are instances of simultaneous speech where a speaker other than the current speaker begins to speak at or very close to a possible transition place in a current speaker’s utterance (i.e., within the boundaries of the last word). It is this proximity to a legitimate point of speaker alternation that leads us to distinguish overlaps from interruptions. (Zimmerman & West 114)

However, an interruption “is seen as penetrating the boundaries of a unit-type *prior* to the last lexical constituent that could define a possible terminal boundary of a unit-type” (114). They consider overlap as an error in taking turns between speakers, while interruptions are ‘violations’ of the rules of turn-taking structure. They indicate that the suitable place for taking turns is at the end of a unit-type. After observations of cross sex conversations, they find that all interruptions and overlaps are done by male speakers, 98% and 100%, respectively.

Overlap and interruptions are quite prominent throughout the play. Overlap happens at the beginning of the play as the Country Attorney, Sheriff and Mr. Hale violate the rules of turn taking when discussing the crime scene. He interrupts Hale when he asserts that Wright never cares about his wife’s opinion. He argues, “Let’s talk about that later, Mr. Hale” (980). Later, men tend to interrupt women’s speech, changing the topic of the talk or just enforcing sarcastic comments on women’s discussion of Minnie’s isolated life and her relationship with Mr. Wright who stifles her cheerful spirit. For example, the attorney makes fun of Mrs. Hale’s question, “I wonder if she was goin’ to quilt it or just knot it?” He replies sarcastically, “they wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it!”

(985). Men's insistence to interrupt women's speech is a prominent sign of disrespect. Zimmerman and West argue, "For, if interruptions are viewed as violations of a speaker's rights, continual or frequent interruption might be viewed as disregard for a speaker, or for what a speaker has to say. Here, we are dealing with a class of speakers, females, whose rights to speak appear to be casually infringed upon by males" (116-117). Interruptions are not only a violation of speaker's right in turn taking, but they also assert the speakers' inferiority.

The second feature of the dialogue between the characters is silences. Silences can occur in social interactions/conversational exchange when the current speaker or the next speaker are not obliged to speak and can pause before speaking. Here, the term "lapse" can occur (Zimmerman & West 117). There is no definite rule that silence could occur in a conversation. However, female speaker "exhibits the most silence" in cross-sex segments (118). However, silence is distributed equally in same-sex conversations. Sometimes, the speaker employs minimal responses or supportive responses such as "Um," "Um hmm"). It is "a sign of active listenership (in effect, 'I understand what you are saying') with, moreover, the least intervention in the development of a topic by the other speaker (in effect, 'Go on, say more.')" (122).

Minimal responses or active listenership is an invitation to the speaker to continue developing the topic. However, the speaker's reluctance to respond signifies disinterest. Zimmerman and West believe, "The silence that follows a delayed minimal response reflects, we believe, the other speaker's uncertainty as to her partner's orientation to the current state of the conversation, an uncertainty generated by these several possibilities" (123). For example, the minimal response of County Attorney "Yes-?" to Mrs. Hale's declaration that she has not "seen much of her of late years," (982) is supposed to support Mrs. Hale to continue her contribution. However, she changes the topic of the talk at that point and starts to talk about the house. She said, "It never seemed a very cheerful place" (982). This change suggests that she feels that County Attorney is not really interested in hearing this praise of Minnie, as he ridicules her previous comments about her. It could be concluded that both minimal responses and interruptions are 'topic control mechanisms.'

These mechanisms are used deliberately throughout the speech by male characters to underline their superiority and to assert their right to control over the topics discussed.

The differences between women and men's in taking turns is an indication of their social advantage or superior social position. Therefore, the differences in the distribution of taking turns between females and males may "be parallel to the differences between them in the society's economic system, i.e., a matter of advantage" (Zimmerman & West 124). Based on turn-taking violations, men assert their right to control the topics and take turns, while denying women's right to occupy an equal position.

The women's obligation to answer the attorney's questions, which is marked by a brief silence from him, is put into focus when he asks Mrs. Peters, "Mrs. Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs. Peters?" Mrs. Peters replies, "Not—just that way." At this point, he reminds Mrs. Peters that she is not allowed to support her own sex. She is not only married to a representative of patriarchal law, but she is also a servant of this law. His power is underscored when he asks to inspect things before sending them to Minnie in prison. He says, "I would like to see what you take, Mrs. Peters." Here, power is exercised and enacted in discourse as he argues, "I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked out."

Deborah Cameron questions the predominant thought that women talk more than men. She states, "Typically they use language in a collaborative way: they are good at listening and creating support. Men are more competitive, good at arguing their corner and asserting themselves" (578). This assumption is put into focus in *Trifles*, as women's use of language is both supportive and cooperative. They follow this style from the beginning of the play. Men's belittling attitude and competitive use of language urge women to use an indirect language, as they resort to hiding the evidence for fear of men's powerful position. This attitude is a byproduct of patriarchal society which ascribes an inferior position to females and a superior position to males. Regarding males and females verbal communication, researchers "found extensive individual differences, but no differences between men and women: the mean for both sexes

was around 16,000 words” (578). Cameron asserts that there are some linguistic differences between women and men; however, “many of the commonest claims made about them have their roots in cultural mythology rather than scientific research” (580).

As women and men have different psychological differences while communicating, they leave differing influences on others. According to Academic and popular research papers, these differences are prominent in conversation characteristics and stylistic differences between women and men (Merchant 16). For example, women and men are indulged in conversations for different purposes. Merchant states, “Academic research on psychological gender differences has shown that while women use communication as a tool to enhance social connections and create relationships, men use language to exert dominance and achieve tangible outcomes” (17). Generally, women tend to be polite, expressive and cooperative in order to make intimate social relationships, while men are dominant, direct and independent in conversation in order to achieve social supremacy. Therefore, “Men...are viewed as more likely than women to offer solutions to problems in order to avoid further seemingly unnecessary discussions of interpersonal problems” (17-18). However, women use conversation to form social relationships or bonding.

Gender differences between women and men are quite apparent in the way women communicate and lead each other. In *Trifles*, women are engaged emotionally in a deep conversation, the aim of which is to find the truth. Unlike men who are involved in an interrogative conversation the aim of which is to prove the truthfulness of their biased judgment against Minnie, i.e., men are unattached, women are emotional and hesitant. These gender differences in communication styles between men and women give the impression that women are inferior to men (19). According to this subordinate position, women are viewed as inefficient leaders. As both women and men are involved in solving the crime, the differences are put into focus. Men are assertive and try to dominate the situation, while women are empathetic and try to imagine what happens between Minnie and her husband. Instead of encouraging and motivating the women to find the truth, the men make fun of them.

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The play reveals the confining gender roles imposed by patriarchal system through the institution of marriage. Female oppression is discussed through the characters' investigation into the murder and the small details they start to patch up to reveal the truth behind the murder. Once the characters reach the real reasons behind the murder, they suggest that the murder is the result of a subjugating relationship between Minnie and her husband. It could be inferred that the play presents the stages of the rising strength of female characters throughout the play. The play depicts the difference between Mrs. Minnie's single life and married life. As a single woman, she is cheerful. She is dressed up in expensive clothes. However, after her marriage she is forbidden to participate in the social life or communicate with other people. She is imprisoned in her house and forced to stifle her dreams of a happy married life. This sad life is the result of dominating patriarchal power that preserves confining social and cultural construction of women.

Although Minnie does not appear on the stage, she is represented by the characters' description of her character. Some objects in Minnie's kitchen are used to give clues about the crime and justifications for the physical transgression. These clues/ hidden messages were decoded by the female characters in the play, as they share the same daily experiences. Mrs. Hale argues, "We [women] all go through the same things-it's all just a different kind of the same thing" (989). Regardless of Minnie's absence, the clues that exist in the kitchen provide evidence that Minnie is subjugated by traditional duties and limited life in the farm. Although she is an invisible character, she is able to highlight the shared experiences of traditional women at that time. As the character leaves her home to stay in prison, her life in the farm is worse than her life in the prison due to her husband's refusal to participate in social life or even have a phone in the house. Mr. Hale reveals, "I spoke to Wright about [a party telephone] once before and he put me off. I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John" (980).

The women share the same experience of confinement, as they remain in the kitchen throughout the play. Therefore, they are more eligible to decode the hidden messages and understand the motives behind Minnie's actions. Meanwhile, men are unable to unravel the

significance of the domestic objects found by the women, as they do not share the same experiences which are looked down upon by the society. This is quite clear in Mr. Hale's statement that "Women are used to worrying over trifles" (982). This asserts the fact that men and women's differences are supported by biased social norms and subjective experiences of the outer world, which justify their differing responses to details and their significance. While men see Minnie's kitchen objects such as the broken stove, the unfinished quilt and the stained towel as mere kitchen objects which are used to criticize Minnie as a housewife, "Not much of a housekeeper" (982), the women understand the hidden messages that indict Mr. Wright rather than his wife.

The male characters consider the broken stove a proof of Minnie's failure as a housewife, although repairing it is Mr. Wright's duty. The broken stove signifies the cold temperature that causes the jars to crack and reveals Minnie's struggle to prepare the meals. Due to Mr. Wright's failure to mend the stove, the home lacks warmth, which Minnie tries to make it right by quilting a bedcover as a warming object. It is also a proof that Minnie is a good housewife who makes good use of her time and resources, since she exploits textile leftovers to make a bedcover. The women hide the truth and develop a sense of alliance that defies social norms. They put together pieces of information in order to reach the complete picture of Minnie and Mr. Wright's life. Here, guilt is not only restricted to the perpetrator, but it also includes the victim. Mr. Wright is punished for his cruelty and misbehavior toward his wife. Thus, the play justifies the killing of Mr. Wright instead of indicting the murderer.

The kitchen, which is females' private place, is used as the source of change and resistance to patriarchal domination. While the kitchen is seen as a confining place which restricts women to domestic roles that render them powerless, it refers to women's ability to create their own space; their own autonomy. As the play deals with the tiny details that indict or vindicate Minnie, it reveals some of them and leaves others unexpressed. It motivates the reader to fill in the gaps in the text/story. The reader's journey to uncover these details is guided by the Minnie's neighbors; Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter. This requires the reader to ponder on the effect of the past on the present, which is disregarded by male characters who impose their

patriarchal understanding of female role and experience. They fail to perceive the tiny details or the hidden messages that Minnie left in the kitchen, because they judge her world and activities as trivial. Ironically, the disarranged state of the room irritates the attorney more than the murder itself. The two men try to find evidence that indict the murder, while the two women try to uncover the real motives/reasons behind the murder. The women use their previous knowledge of Minnie and Wright's characters to imagine the nature of their relationship. They believe that the two men would laugh if they share the little information of the dead canary that could be the reason behind this crime. Mrs. Peters says, "My, It's good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a-dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with-wouldn't they laugh!" (989). The two ladies are always afraid of men's sarcastic reactions of their thoughts about the crime.

Throughout the play, the women identify with Minnie's agonizing marital experience. For example, Mrs. Hale understands the message behind the chaotic threads of Minnie's quilt, since she lives in the same society that silences female voice. She is aware that the irregular stitches are a result of abusive family life. Likewise, Mrs. Peters feels sorry for the killing of Minnie's Canary, as she remembers how she felt when the boy killed her kitten. She recites, "When I was a girl-my kitten-there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes-and before I could get there-(*covers her face an instant*) If they hadn't held me back I would have-(*catches herself, looks upstairs where steps are heard, falters weakly*)-hurt him" (988). Mrs. Peters hesitates before expressing her real emotions toward the boy, as women are not allowed to reveal strong emotions. However, her story justifies female characters' violent behavior toward physical and emotional abuse. She touches upon the effect of the debilitating feelings of loneliness on Minnie's life, as she remembers her dead son. She says, "I know what stillness is. When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died-after he was two years old, and me with no other then" (988). As Mrs. Peters know how it feels to be lonely, isolated and victimized, she hides the evidence that indicts Minnie. Thus, Minnie's crime is a protest against transgression that is based on sexist gender relation. Mrs. Peters chooses to hide the truth

in order to challenge the patriarchal society which is blind to females' oppression.

Female bonding or female characters' identification with Minnie is motivated by their experience of the same kind of repression. Mrs. Hale explains, "I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be-for women. I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart" (989). The female characters share the same experiences and are prone to commit the same crime if they experience the same situation. Therefore, they decide to hide the truth, suggesting that the murderess has suffice motives to murder Mr. Wright. Female bonding is used to stand against an alienating sense of inferiority in a patriarchal society. Crime is used as a symbol of the inherent conflict in a biased society which seems peaceful in the surface, but entirely traumatized from the inside.

Men refuse to consider the trivial clues that are left by Minnie because it would endanger their patriarchal rules. Minnie's things and silence are used instead of language as a weapon of resistance to dominant male language. While silence is adopted by Minnie to indict the patriarchal society, it is also adopted by the two women to save Minnie and defeat the dominant culture that despises female experience. As the two men try to use the chaotic household to indict Minnie of murder, the two women use it to save her by erasing possible clues to the crime. The play shows the influence of patriarchal destructive power on the private/family life. It uses silence to condemn male domination in order to urge the reader to take active role in reading/ decoding Minnie's story.

As the play is entitled *Trifles*, attention to details plays a dominant role. The playwright reveals the relations among tiny details, which motivate the reader to take apart in unraveling the mystery of the murder crime. The title of the play highlights how female world is devalued, as males' disrespect to females' role prevents them from finding the truth among the tiny details, especially after their demeaning remark that females always worry over trifles. Males' inability to notice details questions their claimed superiority in the play. They would lose control if they acknowledge that they failed in their mission.

There are two important metaphors that help understand the nature of the relationship between the couple; the bird and the quilt. For example, the bird is used to signify the delicate nature of Minnie. Killing Minnie's bird refers to killing her delicate soul, while the cage of the bird represents the confinement of Minnie in her house. She is imprisoned in an abusive relationship that induces the most obnoxious traits in a human being. In this sense Mr. Wright's killing of the bird is a symbolic trial to erase Minnie's individuality. To Minnie, the bird could be a companion whose voice disrupts the silence of the solitary prison she lives in. The cage could refer to a male-dominated society, while the broken cage symbolizes that she and the bird are set free. Although they lost their ability to survive, they gain a precious reward, freedom. Minnie's quilt is another metaphor which symbolizes Minnie's knotting the rope around Mr. Wright's neck. Knotting could also refer to female bonding as they share the same experience.

Women's power:

The characters' use of language puts into focus socially-imposed subjugating gender roles that define women's language, place, options and positions. Women's use of indirect language shows powerlessness in the face of male hegemonic power. However, their awareness of this position enables them to succeed in finding the truth and resisting male power. Apparently, female bonding becomes an empowering strategy that motivates women to stand against social oppression.

The play reveals that males and females could have different perceptions of justice, as females' judgment is affected by their empathetic attitude toward the criminal. Instead of abiding by male-made rules, the two ladies disparage these rules and unite with the murderess. Here, men and women depend on differing ethical points of view to reach their judgment. While men rely on abstract rules, women based their judgment on emotional empathy. Latifa Jabboury says, "This switch allows them to formulate a 'redefinition of . . . crime' which finds more culpability in their earlier failure to help Minnie than in their 'moral choice' to suppress evidence" (17). Female bonding proves sufficient enough to beat patriarchal law.

The solution of the crime does not only depend on objective discussion of events or motivations, but it also includes reflecting on the miserable life of the convicted person. Finding the truth needs an objective person whose main aim is to solve the case not to issue judgements, as in the case of the men. This does not mean supporting women's decision to hide the evidence, but it stresses the fact that oppression, violence and belittling others can stir surprising responses. The playwright manages to let the reader judge this situation from the women's point of view. Therefore, she makes the three women control the action of the play, which is the contrary of what happens in a male-dominated society.

The play puts into focus women's marginalization in society. In a male-dominated society, women fulfill certain gender roles that define and shape their identities. Glaspell changes this social construction of women by giving them empowering roles. Gender was very much a part of the dialogue, especially the unspoken part. During their speech, men usually hold the ground and are described as domineering and sarcastic of women's language, way of thinking and social roles in general. Glaspell uses the characters' gestures, setting and action to help the audience infer the hidden meanings of certain utterances. Throughout the play, men draw peculiar attention to females' trivial roles as housekeepers, use of language, and poor ability of logical thinking. At the beginning, women succumb to men's sarcastic remarks. They are committed to silence or just feeling abashed. Later, female bonding is used to stand against the society which supports male domination and cruelty.

The dialogue of the play is a means of understanding the connection between gender, language and social construction. Men's use of conversational strategies such as interruption, holding the ground or topic control demonstrate inequality among the characters in conversations. During men's arguments, there are overt charges that Minnie is not a good wife. There are also implicit remarks that women, in general, are fuzzy-minded creatures who care about trivial things, which is proved to be a flawed hypothesis by the end of the play. Women and men's interaction suggests unequal distribution of power and is filled with interruptions and overlapping. Usually, women are forced to terminate the talk when men appear on the stage, which asserts the powerful position of men at work here.

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As the characters discuss Minnie's life before and after marriage, they encourage the readers to sympathize with her. Moreover, the women's silence instigate the readers to enforce their analysis of what happened, making use of their interpretations of the characters' intentions. The characters do not really mean that Minnie killed Wright, or affirm that he killed the bird. They could have given clear demonstrations of their judgments, but they find it enough to covertly affirm their doubts. The conversation between men and women could be referred to as an "interactional contest", as women are positioned as defendants against prejudice pronounced against Minnie, i.e. their sex.

Passive constructions are used in discussing the case. Agentless passives are used to avoid responsibility, as they are faced with presumed beliefs that support the assignment of power and authority to men. Mrs. Peters argues, "It must have been done awful crafty and still. They say it was such a-funny way to kill a man" (984). It is not possible to understand why the characters behave in the way they do without considering the relation between gender and power in speech. Ignoring the fact that the society should account for why it is normal for men to restrict women's independence, looking down upon their roles in the society, scorning their mental abilities, and condemning them to unquestioned obedience, while men themselves are independent, superior and powerful maintains the subservient role of women.

Male characters' belittling language and their opinion of women, usually negative, is disempowering. Women's use of indirect language reveal that they are reduced to their traditional roles as passive objects, as men's discussion is centered on Minnie's kitchen, dirty towel, and sticky cupboard. Mrs. Hale suggests that judging Minnie's performance is irrelevant to investigating the crime. Meanwhile, women's criticism of men is never made explicit. They are banned from participating in solving the case, as they are incompetent, and unintelligible. However, their success to reach the main reasons of the crime renders these judgements invalid.

Through the characters' use of language, the play sheds light on two incompatible notions of female identity. The first construction is man-made and suggests that women are incapable of fulfilling

important roles. The other construction stresses the fact that women's capabilities can trespass men's expectations. Their success is not shaped or supported by cultural or social circumstances; it is the result of shared experiences and an adamant resistance against oppressive male power. The fact that the play revolves around a murder crime committed by a woman, who is subjugated by physical and emotional transgression, challenges the social construction of gender roles. This suggests a change to gender relations and gender roles, revealing the conflict that is inherent in everyday life.

Conclusion:

Throughout the play, language use reflects social background and language and gender differences. Women use indirect language to avoid men's sarcasm, while men use direct and assertive language that reflects their authoritative position. This gendered use of language reflects that the society assigns stereotypical roles that restrict women to the household and encourage men to participate in public life.

There are some situations in which women's speech differs from men's speech. Generally, women are discriminated against by the language males use, which reflects cultural bias against women. This paper puts into focus this linguistic phenomenon, putting into focus the differences between women's speech and men's speech. Men tend to use discriminatory language that belittles women's gender roles and social position, which reflects social bias exercised against women at that era. Meanwhile, women use female bonding and silence as resistance techniques to overcome patriarchal oppression. Although the main character does not appear on the stage, her silence jeopardizes the dominating rule of men. In the end, women break free from patriarchal oppression and overcome oppressive power of males through female bonding.

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