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The discourse of female politicians in the political arena: The case of the Macedonian 'Iron Lady'

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Abstract

The presence of female politicians in the political arena worldwide is becoming increasingly more conspicuous and undisputable. However, female politicians are constantly challenged to justify their worth in politics not only by their male counterparts but also by media and the public. One mechanism that enables them to 'survive' in such a competitive, male-dominated environment is to conform to the previously established linguistic practices of male politicians, which, unfortunately, frequently leads to female politicians receiving harsh backlash for resorting to such 'unladylike' mannerisms. In this paper, we explore the linguistic practices of a Macedonian female politician, the current mayor of the city of Skopje – Danela Arsovska, who with her relentless and uncompromising political stances, at times, resembles the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, aka the 'Iron Lady'. More specifically, critical discourse and pragmatic analysis are used to unravel the linguistic properties of her confrontational posts on her official FB profile in a period of one year (from March 2022 to March 2023), in which she either fends off the attacks hurled her way by her adversaries, or she herself challenges her opponents' reasoning and actions. In addition, the paper investigates whether her posts elicit positive or negative reactions on the part of FB users and how these reactions via the linguistic choices employed in them mold the political profile of this female politician. Unsurprisingly, the results obtained indicate that the linguistic choices of this female politician in her adversarial posts, which are mainly marked by negative lexis, threats, promises and irony, bear resemblance to the

ones of typical male politicians when faced with political conflicts and controversies.

Keywords: female politicians, political discourse, linguistic features

Introduction

Exploring the issue of gender is not a new, uncharted terrain in linguistic studies. Differences in the way men and women speak were noted and discussed many centuries ago. However, Lakoff's "Language and Woman's Place" (1975) served as a major milestone which instigated an avalanche of studies and approaches tackling the essence of those differences. Thus, initially the *dominance approach* emerged, which depicts the language used by female as 'deficient' in comparison to the 'neutral' language used by men and which as such is intended to keep women in a subservient position in society; then, what followed was the *culture approach*, which attributes these differences to the upbringing of boys and girls in their early childhood years, with competitiveness and assertiveness being encouraged in boys' conduct and language use, as opposed to the qualities of meekness and obedience, which are instilled in girls; and, nowadays, more and more attention is drawn to the *queer linguistics*, which no longer takes the binary (male vs. female) biological sex distinction as its starting point but instead bases its claims on gender being viewed as a fluid social and cultural construct (Coates and Pichler, 2023: 188-196). Despite these new developments in linguistics, the studies that tackle male and female language differences have resurfaced in recent years, spurred particularly by the 'me too movement', which encourages women to speak out about the maltreatment and abuse they have suffered at the hands of men, in order to empower other women to counter injustice and fight inequality more resolutely.

One particularly interesting sphere where gender differences are persistently studied is definitely the sphere of politics, which is normally identified as a hostile territory occupied mainly by men who struggle for power. Although serious efforts have been made towards achieving gender equality in politics in the past fifty years, with more

and more women running for and being elected to national parliaments than ever before (Arustamyan, 2014), still women's struggle for acceptance in this traditionally male dominated domain is far from over (Baxter, 2006: xiv; McGinley, 2009; Wängnerud, 2009; Zakar et al., 2018). The way media represent women politicians has certainly a fair say into why women's progress in politics is still lagging seriously behind (Suleiman & O'Connell, 2008; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Gershon, 2012; Conroy et al., 2015; Cassese et al., 2022).

The international and domestic political stage, understandably, have seen some remarkable examples of women whose presence in politics has set some kind of a precedent. Such is the case of Hillary Clinton who in 2016 ran for president of the USA. Currently, another female politician, Kamala Harris, holds the position of the 49th United States Vice President (Joseph et al., 2021: 285). In the UK, after Margaret Thatcher's astonishing political career as Prime Minister at the end of the 20th century, the decades that followed saw two more women, Theresa May (2016-2019) and Liz Truss (2022-2022) in that same extremely challenging high-ranking position. In Macedonia, the female politician whose linguistic practices are subjected to scrutiny in this study, has also opened a new page in the book of politics, being the first woman entrusted with the management of Macedonia's capital – Skopje.

The women who manage to infiltrate themselves in the political arena are expected to adopt the androcentric norms of male politicians and to use a more adversarial and information-focused style of speaking (Coyle, 2009). However, scholars in their studies qualify this practice as walking on thin ice because 'if women stray too far beyond the boundaries of normative feminine discourse styles when enacting professional identities, they may well be negatively evaluated for being too bossy or overly aggressive'; whereas, if they 'favour normatively feminine speech styles, they may be negatively evaluated for being weak and ineffective' (Mullany and Howard, 2023: 235). Holmes (2020), also draws attention to the same issue, claiming that 'women who successfully adapt to characteristically male linguistic norms run the risk of being perceived as aggressive and confrontational, as un-

feminine, while those who choose to use a more affiliative, cooperative style risk being marginalized' (in Coates and Pichler, 2023: 190).

Nowadays, the political landscape is undergoing drastic changes due to the fact that politicians have learned to harness the power of the Internet in achieving political goals (David, 2022; Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009), and also because social media in particular ease the process of creating information channels which connect politicians directly with the constituents (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018; Zakiyah & Wahyudi, 2022; McGregor & Mourão, 2016).

Taking all of the above into consideration, this research undertakes a critical discourse and pragmatic analysis of a corpus of confrontational Facebook posts of a Macedonian female politician – Danela Arsovska. Moreover, given the fact that social media, Facebook included, provide users with an option to comment on posts, this paper is also aimed at detecting FB users' comments with regards to her confrontational posts. In other words, by analyzing the lexical, pragmatic and rhetorical features of the positive and negative comments, the aim is to ascertain whether people are getting more appreciative of female politicians' adopting male linguistic behavior in politics or whether the conviction that they should restrain their discourse to polite and feminine linguistic conduct only, still prevails. The ultimate goal of the research is to ascertain how the female politician's linguistic choices in her confrontational posts and the linguistic choices of FB users in their comments contribute to construing her political identity, in this day and age, when women are relentlessly trying to be accepted as equal 'players' on the political stage.

Theoretical background

A number of researchers have attempted to shed light on the differences in male and female political discourse. Thus, a common finding in gender and language research is that women's speech contains linguistic features that are marked with cooperativeness, and men's speech contains linguistic features that are marked with competitiveness (Coates, 1989; Holmes, 1995). This, in turn, suggests

that 'women's collaborative, supportive style leads to their being dominated in mixed groups and unfavourably evaluated in public domains such as law and politics where a more masculine, adversarial style is valued' (Coates, 1989: 195). Holmes (1995: 130) puts forth empirical evidence for the existence of women's co-operative speech style and presents 'women's conversational style as more interpersonal, affective and interaction-orientated compared to the impersonal and content-orientated style more typical of male interaction'. Holmes's evidence for women's use of a co-operative style includes their use of encouraging verbal feedback (minimal responses and backchannels), the introduction of topics aimed at maintaining talk, and their use of 'other oriented' pragmatic particles and speech acts such as complimenting and apologising (Holmes, 1995: 193). As to men's style, Holmes (1995: 193) finds that men are more concerned with the referential functions of talk; that they give fewer compliments and apologies than women, and that they use encouraging feedback less than women.

The fact that politics is still an arena reserved for the male voice finds its confirmation in Shaw's (2006) study which looks into the experience of women members of parliament in the UK. Shaw (2006) acknowledges that an important way to 'do' power in parliamentary debate is to manage to hold the floor and that women have difficulties holding the floor because of their male counterparts' frequent interruptions. More than a decade later, Shaw (2020) pursues this same issue in a new study and discovers that similar gender patterns still persist in the UK House of Commons (in Coates and Pichler, 2023: 190). Back and Debus (2018) investigated if female representatives participate less often in legislative debates, and whether the topic debated influences their participation. Their results show that female members of parliament are less represented in legislative debates, especially when debates deal with topics that can be characterised as masculine. Cameron and Shaw (2016: 2) analyse the behavior of British women politicians, and suggest that women 'eschew aggression and point-scoring in favour of cooperation and consensus, thus making politics more civilized, more modern, and more human'. Cameron and

Shaw (2016: 3) find further confirmation for this claim in Childs' study (2004) which includes in-depth interviews with twenty-three Labour women MPs who entered the House of Commons in 1997. Almost two thirds of them stated that women have a different approach to politics, and that their language was markedly different from the language of their male colleagues. Namely, women prefer a 'less combative and aggressive style', with 'less standing up and shouting on the floor of the House'. However, although the interviewed female politicians accord positive value to their style of speech, they still complain that their style is viewed as less legitimate and effective than the traditional 'male' style (in Cameron and Shaw, 2016: 3).

Drawing on a number of previous studies, Zakiyah and Wahyudi (2022: 350) also confirm that women politicians have their own specific speaking style which is characterized with a tendency to respond more often, interrupt less, use more pronouns, ask more questions, and speak more politely. Zakiyah and Wahyudi's (2022) study focuses on the political discourse of the former UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, by conducting an analysis of the word choices in her tweets in order to ascertain how she articulated her mission within the UK's social and political contexts. Their findings suggest that with her specific word choices, she makes a positive representation of herself as a woman leader, but, at the same time, she successfully creates a negative image for her opponents too (Zakiyah and Wahyudi, 2022: 354).

Given the clear differences in the political discourse of female and male politicians, some researchers set to disclose whether women politicians change their discourse deliberately to make it more aligned with the linguistic practices established by male politicians. Thus, Walsh (2001) investigates whether women uncritically accept pre-existing discursive practices in institutional contexts that have been previously monopolised by men (such as parliament and the Church of England). Her findings suggest that the presence of women in these institutions challenges the dominant discursive practices. Jones (2016) examines the political discourse of a specific politician, Hillary Clinton, in the period from 1992 until 2013, in an attempt to discover whether she talked more 'like a man' as her political career made progress.

Interestingly, the results show that Hillary's language grew progressively more masculine over time as her power in politics expanded. Grebelsky-Lichtmana and Bdolach's (2017) study, which aimed to examine the communication patterns of women in the political sphere in five democratic Western countries, in the period from 2009 and 2012, reveals that female politicians' communication consists, in fact, of a combination of feminine non-verbal communication patterns and masculine verbal communicative expressions.

Cameron (2003) draws attention to a very interesting phenomenon emerging in recent decades with powerful men combining the 'feminine' communicative skills (e.g. emotional expressiveness, good listening and rapport) with their traditionally masculine ones which presuppose authority, enterprise and leadership. To illustrate this point she discusses the political discourse of Bill Clinton, the former President of the USA, and Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of the UK. Cameron also underlines that male politicians who combine masculine with feminine conduct are widely admired, unlike female politicians who are never commended for developing masculine characteristics, just as nobody has ever said approvingly that Margaret Thatcher was 'in touch with her masculine side' (Cameron, 2003: 463) (in Coates and Pichler, 2023: 197).

Research methodology

The female politician whose political discourse was analysed in this study is the current mayor of the city of Skopje, Danela Arsovska. She assumed office in 2021 and became practically the first woman mayor of the capital of Macedonia. Arsovska ran the mayor's race as an independent candidate and won the seat as a result of the support she received from the VMRO-DPMNE¹-led opposition.

The main reason why her discourse is subjected to analysis in this study is because shortly after assuming office, she quickly draw the

¹ VMRO-DPMNE stands for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

public's attention to herself with some rather relentless and uncompromising political stances, reminiscent of the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, also known as the 'Iron Lady'.

Like many of her contemporary political counterparts, the Skopje mayor too, has set an official FB page where she maintains a regular practice of posting announcements about her daily activities. In the first phase of this research, a corpus of the mayor's FB announcements, posted in a period of one year (from March 2022 to March 2023) was compiled. Then, the content of the posts was analyzed in order to extract the posts conveying a critical stance towards somebody or something ('confrontational posts') from the posts intended to inform the public about the mayor's daily activities ('informative posts'). Next, a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and pragmatic analysis (Searle, 1975; Searle, 1976) of her confrontational posts were performed, with the aim, first, to determine the topics addressed in them, and second, to inspect the linguistic means (the choice of lexis, rhetorical devices and speech acts) employed by the mayor in addressing those topics.

In the second phase of the research, the analysis was directed at FB users' comments written in response to the mayor's confrontational posts. The aim was to detect whether the mayor's confrontational posts were welcomed and encouraged by people, or, perhaps, condemned as 'unladylike' conduct. Moreover, the analysis was directed at answering what political profile FB users portrayed for this female politician via these comments, i.e. via the lexical, rhetorical and pragmatic means employed in them.

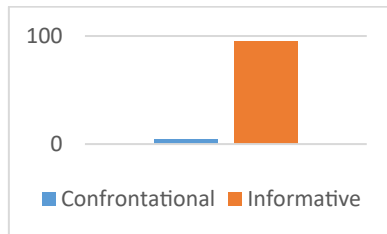
Results

In the period from March 2022 to March 2023, the mayor posted a total of 373 posts on her official Facebook page (Danela Arsovska, public figure).

The content analysis of her posts reveals that most of them were of informative nature (94.5%)(Fig. 1). The mayor addressed a wide range of topics, such as, meetings she has had with political figures, sports men and women, teachers and students, elderly people, people

with disabilities and people with rare diseases; the progress made with respect to certain construction projects in the capital; her official visits abroad, the issues she discussed with her foreign counterparts, and the agreements they had signed. A considerably smaller portion of these posts were intended to extend good wishes to the citizens in light of some important national and religious holidays in the country.

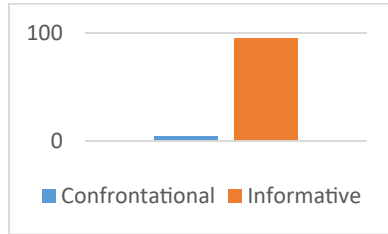
Figure 1 Confrontational vs. Informative Posts



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Figure 1 Confrontational vs. Informative Posts



Only 18 of the posts (4.8%) were of confrontational nature, and these were initiated either as a response to previous criticism the mayor received for her work, or as a response to some controversial situation caused by her political opponents or some other entities. The content analysis of these posts reveals that the mayor chose to be confrontational with respect to four distinct topics: a) the current government's 'inefficiency'; b) the mayor's fallout with the opposition; c) the issue with the private bus owners in the capital, and d) the pollution in the capital.

In the following sections, we will look into the linguistic features of her confrontational posts in more detail, in order to ascertain what lexical, pragmatic and rhetorical devices she used to demarcate her position with regards to these four topics.

a) The 'inefficiency' of the current government

In these posts, the mayor openly challenges the current SDSM²-led government, attaching the attribute "incapable" to it, primarily because of their alleged lack of knowledge and expertise to solve the central heating problem in the capital (1).

(1) I am sorry but I have to confirm again the Government's inability to deal with the challenges caused by the energy crisis, which the people of Skopje are facing. What is even more worrying is the lack

² SDSM stands for Social Democratic Union of Macedonia

of information on the part of the institutions themselves about their own jurisdictions with respect to the central heating supply system.³ (September 25, 2023)

In the example below (2), she points her finger at the Prime Minister, Dimitar Kovacheski, depicting him as an irrational politician who is using media to distract people from the pressing heating problem. The lexis she uses to depict his conduct is charged with negative emotions (e.g. he loiters, spreads falsehoods, boasts, manipulates the citizens).

(2) As a reminder, as early as 10.01.2022, Prime Minister Kovacevski boasted that the Government will not allow the citizens of Skopje to remain without heating, however, the heating season has just started, and instead of a practical solution, the citizens face cold radiators. Spreading lies and manipulating citizens will not solve the economic and energy crisis. On the contrary, Prime Minister Kovacevski should urgently tackle these problems, instead of loitering from media to media, spreading falsehoods. (September 25, 2023)

As the mayor is particularly indignant with the government for their attempt to shift the blame onto the city authorities, she resorts to negatively connotated lexis to depict their actions as 'inefficient' (e.g. disgusting, unnecessary, they shift the blame) (3).

(3) The attempts to shift the blame on the part of those who did not take adequate measures to amortize the price shock in this crisis is disgusting and unnecessary, because if they had reacted in a timely manner, as the rest of the governments have done, now there wouldn't have been so many big problems. Due to their continuously belated measures, now we all pay much more for electricity, central heating, and oil derivatives. (25 September 2022)

In some of the posts, she addresses the current Minister of Economy, Kreshnik Bekteshi. Her response to his accusing her for the unresolved heating issue in Skopje is uncompromising and unabashed

³ The mayor's posts and FB users' reactions mentioned in this paper are translated from Macedonian to English by the author.

and it suggests that the Minister is not familiar with his own duties and lacks vital skills to deal with the problems (4).

(4) It is really unfortunate that Bekteshi is expecting the City of Skopje to solve his problems... Minister Bekteshi should know his own responsibilities and he should solve the citizens' problems. Let me remind the minister, who photographed himself next to donated oil, which he could not procure himself, that he has no right to talk about someone else's ability... And instead of looking for 'victims' for his own incompetence, he should find a way to meet the needs of the citizens who live on the verge of poverty because of his 'successful' economic policies. If I have to perform the duties of the Minister of Economy too, Bekteshi should submit his resignation. (June 16, 2022)

She amplifies her disapproval of the minister with irony, used to make fun of him for being photographed next to donated oil, because he, according to the mayor, could not procure it for his country in his capacity as minister. Her ironic comment then extends to his overall unsuccessful policies which have led many people to live on the verge of poverty. Finally, she juxtaposes her 'competence' against his 'lack of competence' by finishing her post with one final ironic jibe suggesting that the minister should resign his post.

Evidently, in these confrontational posts she is challenging adversarial remarks previously addressed to her by members of government, depicting them as inefficient and shallow politicians. In doing so she relies on lexis used with ostensibly negative connotation, irony as a rhetorical device and the speech act of assertives with which she states her opinions in whose truthfulness and validity she is absolutely convinced.

b) The mayor's fallout with the opposition

As mentioned previously, shortly after assuming office as Skopje's mayor, Arsovska found herself amidst a rather vocal, public row with the opposition, especially with its leader, Hristijan Mickovski, on the grounds that they were involved in some illicit practices, or in the mayor's own words, the discord started because she 'caught them with their hands in the honey'. Consequently, some of her FB posts

reflected these new and unexpected developments and featured the mayor's verbal attacks launched at the opposition.

In one of her posts, she depicts the opposition leader as a criminal who is threatening her with retaliatory actions because she is disobeying his 'instructions'. What she attempts to do in this post is turn these alleged threats against him, making a point that people like him must not be allowed to come to power as they will very likely misuse it (5).

(5) A person who issues such threats must not be given a position of authority, as he could misuse it to fulfill his threats... (December 15, 2022)

Some of her attacks also target other representatives of the opposition, such as, for instance, Darko Kostovski, the mayor of Butel⁴ (6).

(6) I refute with indignation the lies that the mayor of the municipality of Butel, Darko Kostovski, has told in the last few days. (March 11, 2023).

By using the phrase, *I refute with indignation*, she indicates that her post is provoked by criticism addressed to her by this opposition-affiliated politician. She responds to his criticism with accusations, using lexis which label him as a deceitful politician who stoops so low as to spread lies about her. She enhances her disapproval of him by employing a metaphoric expression, with which she compares the opposition's headquarters and their practice of forging lies about her with a kitchen where meals are being cooked and prepared (7).

(7) We owe a detailed explanation to the public about the series of manipulations and notorious lies that were made public these days, and which were ordered and prepared in the party kitchens of VMRO-DPMNE. (March 11, 2023)

Her lexical choices clearly revolve around negatively connotated terms such as *manipulations*, *notorious lies*, *political games*, *machinations*, *political conartists* and *bogus politics*, and are aimed at both tarnishing her opponents' reputation and delegitimizing their position (8).

⁴ Butel is one of the municipalities under jurisdiction of the city of Skopje.

(8) ... I want to appeal to the citizens living in this part of the municipality of Butel not to fall for the political games and manipulations of some political con-artists who try to take advantage of them with their bogus politics. (March 11, 2023)

Towards the end of 2022, the public institutions under the jurisdiction of the city of Skopje were subjected to scrutiny, and the mayor, being visibly dissatisfied with the results achieved by some of them, asked their managers to resign. Many attributed this to her ongoing 'feud' with the opposition, as the managers who found themselves in this precarious situation were affiliated with the opposition. Hence, in some of her confrontational posts, she informs these managers in no uncertain terms that she will undertake a thorough cleansing of the public institutions in order to rid them of the inefficient management which is deficient of the expertise needed to manage these institutions properly. By using strong assertions (e.g. *There is no going back!*), and by using the speech act of directives in the form of suggestions (e.g. *You can attack me all you want./ ... you'd better resign!*), she portrays herself as a courageous and determined leader who would stop at nothing in her pursuit to fix the long-term problems plaguing the city of Skopje (9).

(9) You can attack me all you want. Threaten me as much as you want. Every day you make threats against my life, my safety - you threaten me, you threaten some of the counselors here who are not to your liking! THERE IS NO GOING BACK! If you are here for privileges and you feel disappointed, you'd better resign! (November 28, 2022).

In the same context, she employs the speech act of commissives in the form of threats, warning those who expect to get payment for doing nothing that it will not happen. Thus, she clearly attempts to mold a political image for herself which exudes confidence, courage and determination (10).

(10) We begin an uncompromising fight against the partisanship of institutions - there will be no more salary for those who do nothing at work. (October 24, 2022)

c) The issue with the private bus owners in Skopje

In a number of her confrontational posts, the mayor blames the private bus transporters in Skopje for illicit practices and tax evasion, as a result of which at one point, she even terminates their contract. This, in turn, initiated a series of protests in the capital, the outcome of which was a complete chaos – blocked streets, terrible traffic congestion as well as immensely frustrated citizens.

In her critical posts, via the speech act of commissives in the form of promising, the mayor reiterates her firm determination that she will solve this issue and that she has no intention to become an accomplice to the criminal dealings of the private bus owners (11).

(11) Neither I, nor the city of Skopje shall be allies to criminals whose crime has lasted since 2017 and who have made a huge profit by taking advantage of the honest bus drivers' labour and the citizens of Skopje! (November 24, 2022).

Her posts, in this case too, revolve around negatively charged lexis, such as *crime*, *criminals*, *taking advantage* and *making a huge profit*.

In one of these posts she draws a sharp line between 'I' and 'them', portraying herself as a politician who prioritizes the citizens' best interests, as opposed to the private bus owners whose main concern is merely getting rich. She employs the commissive speech act of threats to notify her 'adversaries' that while she is mayor, she will not allow them to take advantage of the citizens' money (12); she also makes promises that she will do everything in her power to protect the citizens (12) and (13).

(12) Political agreements about getting rich by taking away people's money, while I am the mayor of the city of Skopje, I SHALL NOT ALLOW! (November 21, 2022).

(13) We shall never permit anyone to spend the money of the citizens of Skopje on personal businesses and for personal enrichment. We will not allow these people to get rich by taking advantage of people's money and the honest bus drivers' labour. (March 1, 2023).

What is noteworthy in these posts is that the mayor tries to strike a fine balance between taking all the credit herself for countering the private bus owners' illegal practices (e.g. *I SHALL NOT ALLOW ...*) and presenting these efforts as a joint endeavor of the city's authorities (e.g. *We shall never allow the money...*) via an interchangeable use of the pronouns 'I' and 'we'.

d) The problem of pollution in Skopje

Several mayor's posts tackle the enormous level of pollution, which becomes particularly daunting in winter, when Skopje becomes one of the most polluted cities in the world.

The mayor in this set of posts reveals that the inspection initiated by the city of Skopje has pinpointed a major pollutant in Skopje and that, she has notified and encouraged the authorities to take legal actions against the pollutant immediately. She also offers an explanation as to why it is so hard to change the already established pollution patterns in the city, which sadly take such a devastating toll on people's health. Here too, she draws a sharp line between 'us' (the city authorities who try to solve the problem) and 'them' (the entities who cause the pollution). The collocations she uses to refer to her efforts to fix things allude to changes and reforms, but those she uses to draw the contours of the pollutant are loaded with negativity (e.g. a high level of corruption, people enthroned in high positions, people with privileges, people who fight to keep their privileges) (14).

(14) With hindsight, we all know that in these past 30 years it has been very difficult to change the already established system. For every single change we wish to introduce as a reform, we encounter attacks daily. That's because people don't want to change at their core, especially, when a high level of corruption is at stake, when people are enthroned in high positions and are used to enjoying certain privileges. It's normal for them to fight so that they can keep their privileges. (January 20, 2023)

In one of these posts, she takes a firm stance that she will do whatever is necessary to combat the pollutants via legal means. The citizens in this post are depicted as *helpless* and *ailing victims*, whereas the

pollutants as *unscupulous, sly, corruptive manipulators, who poison the citizens* (15).

(15) It is unacceptable for the citizens of the city of Skopje to be victims of a few profit-oriented people who have been poisoning us for decades, trying by means of 'donations' to the municipalities, corrupt behavior and by exerting their influence, not to be held accountable for the environmental pollution they are causing, because of which thousands of citizens have been afflicted with numerous ailments. (January 12, 2023).

Here too, she makes use of the commissive speech act of threats, but this time, in an attempt to deter the pollutants from their harmful behaviour she notifies them that the city authorities will no longer tolerate them and that they will intensify their inspection controls (16).

(16) The city will make use of all legal avenues and will not grant amnesty to anyone who will be caught carrying out activities without the appropriate environmental permit and thereby disrupting the quality of the environment and endangering the health of the citizens of Skopje. This year we intend to undertake more frequent controls and to increase the efficiency of the city inspectorate. (January 12, 2023)

In this context too, clearly the mayor relies primarily on the use of negative lexis, but she also occasionally 'seasons' her posts with the commissive speech act of threats, in order to send a clear signal to her opponents that she is a brave politician, prepared to fight for what she believes is just and good for the citizens of Skopje.

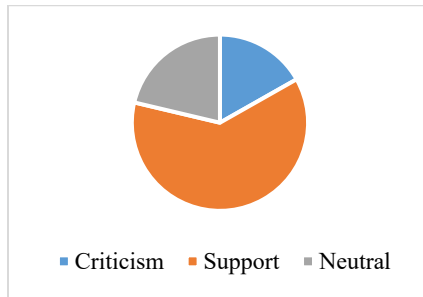
The reactions of FB users to the mayor's confrontational posts

In the second phase of this research, a corpus of 709 FB comments written as a reaction to the mayor's confrontational posts was compiled and subjected to analysis. More precisely, the focus was placed only on the comments in which FB users verbally expressed their opinions about the mayor, i.e. about her political and verbal conduct in light of the above mentioned four topics.

The content analysis of the comments clearly pointed to three distinct groups of comments: a) comments supporting the mayor, b)

comments criticizing the mayor, c) neutral comments. The greatest bulk of the analysed comments were comments written in support of the mayor (61.9%). The comments expressing a neutral stance came second (21.3%), whereas, the adversarial ones were the least frequent (16.8%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2 FB users' comments made in response to mayor's confrontational posts



As to the pragmatic features of the comments written in support of the mayor, the analysis showed that most of them were realized in the form of the expressive speech acts of *praising* (17) and *complimenting* (18).

(17) *Bravo!/Well done Danela Arsovska!/Bravo Danela, that's the way to go, bravo for being just and honest*

(18) *We couldn't find her, even if we had been looking for her. An iron lady who knows how to handle all challenges when necessary./ A really capable, smart and hardworking woman, Well done, Danela! Always honest and always on the side of the truth./ A true leader, a true lioness!/ A role model/ You are fair and honest, follow your own path/ Top!/ Irreplaceable/ Brave and persistent, well done dear./ You are unique.*

In the examples above, it is worth noting that there is an abundance of positive lexical items, commending the mayor for her bravery, persistence, determination, intelligence, honesty, her hard work and leadership skills.

The FB users also bestowed *blessings* onto the mayor for her actions and deeds (19) and *urged* her to stay strong and to persist in her efforts to make things right in the city of Skopje (20).

(19) May God protect you!/ God be with you and keep you safe!/ God bless you sister!

(20) That's right, just go ahead, madam mayor, take their hands out of the honey./ Go ahead, Thacher!/ The people are with you, Daniela, stay brave./ Our queen, be brave and proceed forward.

Some of the commenters undertook the role of advisers of the mayor and used the directive speech acts of giving *advice* or making a *recommendation* (21). In some of the comments the presence of the speech act of assertives was noted too, as some FB users were making *predictions* about the future, envisioning the mayor at the head of the country (22).

(21) I have a proposal, Danela, for you - you should run for President of Macedonia, God willing./ You deserve to be President! You deserve so much more than the post of mayor.

(22) Our next Prime Minister, maybe she will save Macedonia, all the best to her./ Daniela - a stateswoman./ Danela will be the next Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia.

Some of the commenters used the commissive speech act of *promising* to reassure the mayor that she can count on their support (23), but they also extended good wishes (the speech act of expressives) to the mayor and her team (24).

(23) We will stand by you till the end! / We are here for you because we trust you/ Keep doing what you do, you are not alone.

(24) Good luck, Mayor Danela Arsovska to you and your team...

Although less frequently, some of the commenters were more resourceful and expressed their support for the mayor by means of rhetorical devices in the form of *humourous remarks* (25) and *metaphors*,

in which the mayor was compared to a number of positive concepts such as light, strength, wisdom and grace (26).

(25) I am beginning to like you madam mayor./ A woman for all time./ Danela rules!

(26) A bright spot in this darkness/ Lioness/ Chess mat! Well done/ Empress, bravo!

The speech act of expressives in which the commenters expressed positive feelings were in the form of *exclamations* in which subjunctive was used (27), or *pejorative forms* of certain nouns which are not normally used with a positive connotation (28), and *terms of endearment* (29).

(27) Long live the Macedonian lioness!

(28) Super woman/ A bow to the earth, you are not a woman – you're a super woman! Mega player/ Danela, you are a beeeeeaaast, BRAVOOOOO

(29) Well done sunshine, we're happy to have you./ Brave and persistent, all the best darling/ Well done, dear!

Interestingly, despite the evident support, some of the comments were not completely free from sexist language and biases, insinuating that although women are not normally fit to be politicians, this female politician performs her duties commendably well (30).

(30) Well done Arsoški/ Male lady, well done, we need more (politicians) like you/ A real man finally at the head of the city of Skopje/ Respect, she is a bigger man than many men will ever be.

Another set of supportive comments are the ones that allude to the global 'me too movement' (31).

(31) This woman must not have a hair missing from her head ... I am Danela too!/ If this woman has as much as a hair missing from her head, you'd better watch out, as all women are Danela./ A woman, a mother, a lioness.

The neutral comments were not addressing the mayor, and were intended neither to endorse nor to criticize her linguistic and overall conduct. The commenters were simply sharing their personal observations regarding the issues raised in her confrontational posts (32).

(32) Inspections and imprisonment. That's the only way justice will be served for the people./ He (the Minister of Economy) should resign. The Republic of Macedonia does not need incompetent so-called ministers!)

Finally, the least frequent comments were the ones that expressed both overt and covert disagreement with the mayor's viewpoints. The majority of them targeted the mayor's alleged incompetence and her inadequate decisions, and were realised via the rhetorical device of irony, or more precisely, by means of *ironic rhetorical questions* (33), *ironic statements* (34), and *ironic suggestions* which referred mainly to her promises she had failed to keep (35).

(33) What heating season in September for Christ's sake? When was there heating in September?/ You have evidence, or this is just hear-say?/ Alright, you've scolded them on FB, and now what? What will you do about it?

(34) You're lucky that Žmicko (*a nickname for the opposition leader) will never become Prime Minister./ So it seems that your idea of free transport was to have no transport at all.

(35) What has happened to your pre-election promise about Trubarevo and Ergela?/ How about doing something for Skopje, for a change?

Some of the commenters used the speech act of directives and issued orders to the mayor to take this or that course of action (36).

(36) C'mon give us a break, give people their payment and let them drive the buses, so that the passengers won't have to wait./ It is clear that there are many problems, but you are not a judge, do

something useful for the city, for us!/ Lady, we have had enough of your hear-say, get to work! Skopje is blocked by vehicles...

Interestingly, some of the condescending comments referred to her 'betrayal' of the opposition. They were mainly phrased as *metaphoric expressions* which alluded to her 'hypocrisy' and 'fickle-mindedness'. In these comments, she was compared to horned animals, a barking dog as well as a herb – a chamomile plant (37).

(37) It's Mickoski's fault for putting you in that chair./ You are such a whirlwind, everything was fine when they brought you to power, right?/ We voted for you but we made a mistake, you raised your horns against the party that brought you to power/ Without evidence, what you do is just barking.

In this set of comments, unlike in the compliments paid to her by those who praised her performance, the opposite qualifications were ascribed to the mayor via negatively charged lexical choices, such as *irresponsible, irrational, dishonest* and *deceitful* (38).

(38) Madam, as a mayor of Skopje, it does not become you to make such shameful and irresponsible statements./ No one is to be trusted, you are all the same – liars./ She is cheater. She doesn't know how to get herself out of this. She has lost it completely.

The comments that deserve special attention, despite the fact that they were rather infrequent, are the ones that contain: *sexual innuendoes* laden with *irony* (39) and *gender prejudices* alluding to the fact that women's place is not in politics (40) as well as the ones that contained *sexist language*, depicting women as less worthy and inferior to man (41).

(39) It's really not good that they press you. They need to be a little bit gentler with you.

(40) Well, they made you mayor, what part of it you don't understand? ...Now, sister, you're going to mop the floor and even ask if you should do some more mopping./ Aunt Danela, just make sure you don't fall into some mental state, finish the job completely, if you

need connections, I'll arrange them for you./ You've started to behave like a badass, sister! You think you have freed Macedonia, slow down a bit, it's either your therapy, or your diagnosis is wrong, there is no other explanation for a woman putting on such a mafia-like act!!!)

(41) A whore financed by SDSM and DUI.

Conclusion

This research looked into the adversative linguistic practices of a Macedonian female politician, who, because of her bold and uncompromising political stances, resembles Margaret Thatcher at times. The results of this research show that only about 5% of her FB posts are confrontational and they refer to four specific issues that have arisen during the period from March 2022 to March 2023. This leads to the conclusion that this female politician is carefully choosing her 'battles' in the political arena, but once she decides to 'confront' her opponents, the analysis of her posts reveals that she mainly relies on the use of negatively connotative words and phrases, which portray her adversaries in a very unfavourable light. In addition, the persuasive power of her confrontational posts is occasionally enhanced with irony, with which she ridicules her opponents' actions or statements, in an attempt to delegitimize their political position completely. Also, viewed from the prism of pragmatics, her posts belong mainly to the speech act of assertives, with which she expresses her strong convictions, or to the speech act of commissives with which she either threatens to take actions against her adversaries or makes promises to the citizens of Skopje that she will protect them and their interests.

The results obtained from the analysis of the FB users' comments instigated by the mayor's confrontational posts came as the greatest surprise in this study. Instead of the expected comments of condemnation and criticism, which are suggested by previous researchers as a normal course of action whenever a female politician adopts a more aggressive masculine style of doing politics, this politician was mainly praised, commended and encouraged to continue to set things right in Skopje; she even received blessings for and is congratulated on her confrontational style. To sum it up, she was

mainly addressed by means of a wide variety of expressive speech acts with which the commenters showed their appreciation for her. The majority of the comments were also flooded with positive lexis, depicting her as a capable, brave, honest and hardworking politician, to whom a bright future in the highest echelons of Macedonian politics is guaranteed, and a lot of metaphors through which she was compared to a number of positive concepts such as light, wisdom and grace.

In summary, the linguistic choices, made both in the mayor's confrontational posts and in the people's comments to her posts, contribute substantially in creating a predominantly positive political identity for this female politician. These findings, perhaps, in a way, herald a new more democratic era in politics in which the presence and contribution of women will be equally valued as the presence and contribution of their male counterparts.

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