

Discursive denial as an indicator of Gender-based violence against women

¹Dina Elizabeth, ²Lidia Rodríguez, ³María Infante Bonfiglio,
⁴Marlen Domínguez Hernández

*M.E.Dina Elizabeth Cortes Coss Ph.D. Lidia Rodríguez Alfano Ph.D. José María Infante Bonfiglio Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, México
Ph.D. Marlen Domínguez Hernández
Universidad de la Habana, Cuba
Corresponding Autor: Dina Elizabeth*

Abstracta: The main objective of this article is to examine discursive denial—an unconscious way of language formulation—in the speech of women who have suffered physical violence at the hands of their intimate partners. The concept of ‘discourse’ is understood as a communicative practice that constitutes an integral expression of a largescale polysemy and provides a wide range of possible interpretations of the linguistic and paralinguistic resources on which the enunciation is based (Benveniste, 1971). Also, it is acknowledged that discourse analysis allows the identification of some strategies to deny violence. On the basis of theoretical propositions, an initial attempt to analyze these strategies has been carried out, and it has been demonstrated in the data collected in this research: six interviews of women who live in the metropolitan area of Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico.

Key words: *denial, violence, woman, discourse, language*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence against women has been increasingly reported. The reason is that, in spite of the establishment of women’s rights and multiple studies of this problem, according to records of the INEGI (2016: 5, 7), more cases are reported every year in which women are assaulted by their intimate partners in their domestic environments.¹ Frequently the women deny or, at least downplay the relevance of their experiences as victims, and avoid taking responsibility for reporting it. Thus, it is essential to research gender violence against women from the perspective of language studies.

This article is based on the proposition that through analysis techniques and methodologies like those suggested in discourse analysis (Sayago, 2014:1), some variation of the linguistic elements used by the speakers, sometimes unconsciously, can be identified. Also **denying violence mechanisms** can be evidenced through discourse analysis applied to the linguistic elements they use to communicate their challenges and concerns when faced with a violent situation.²

Since the focus of our study is “violence denial mechanisms,” it is important to make clear that, in this article, the verbs ‘to negate’ and ‘to deny’ as well as the nouns ‘negation’ and ‘denial’ are used as synonymous. This decision was based on the International Oxford Dictionary definitions of these terms of Latin origin. Taken from *negat*, and *negare*, these English verbs and nouns refer, among other things: to a logic grammar form that “make (a clause, sentence, or proposition) negative in meaning;” thus, ‘negation’ is “grammar denial of the truth of a clause or sentence, typically involving the use of a negative word (e.g. not, no, never) or a word or affix with negative force (e.g. nothing, non-);” ‘denial’ is the “refusal to acknowledge an unacceptable truth or emotion or to admit it into consciousness, used as a defense mechanism” (Oxford, 2017); and a further definition is provided by the Webster Dictionary (2017): to deny the existence or truth of the actions, effects, and expressions of manifesting lack of something that indicates denial or evasion.

As previously mentioned, this research focuses on the analysis of discursive denial expressed by adult female victims of physical-domestic violence. The specific purpose is to describe the linguistic features, and

paralinguistic elements (intonation, loudness, crying, etc.), which indicate the unconscious manner of negation formulation.

Study sample

The sample consists of six interviews recorded between 2015 and 2016, focused on women who had an episode of domestic violence; later on, the interviews were entirely transliterated and grouped in a corpus called VFMR (by its Spanish acronym, *Violencia Física a Mujeres Regiomontanas*: Physical Violence towards Women from Monterrey). Within the collected material, a symbology to indicate linguistic phenomena is appended, which is based on proposals of Amparo Tuson Valls (1997: 146-148), and Cortes, Sánchez & Rodríguez (2017: 10).³

As was established in Cortes, Sánchez & Rodríguez (2017: 9), the personal data of the participants includes the following information: age; place of birth (the country or state are specified); city inside the metropolitan area; years of residence in Nuevo Leon; civil status (marriage or concubinage); length of intimate relationship; level of education; profession or occupation; and, in addition to location data; some information about the specific place where the interview took place.

The interviews were recorded inside a closed classroom, where only the interviewer and the subject are present. The place was provided with air conditioning, windows for light, and two facing chairs. This environment avoids any kind of interference, and allows the participant's information to be confidential, authentic, and cooperative. In fact, during the interviews, besides the physical violence (the object of study in this article), the interviewees recount other types: most common being psychological, sexual, economical, and institutional violence. When referring to those topics, paralinguistic elements like crying and giggling were frequently noticed.

The following profile characterizes all interviewees: Women; 23 to 41 years old at the moment they were interviewed; living in Nuevo Leon, Mexico; with a past violent relationship or partner; physically abused by their intimate partner for more than a year. In addition, these women were provided with government protection.

From the sample, in order to study discursive negation in the present research, the transcription of participant 04, identified as M4, was chosen. The reason for this is that her ways of evading the violence topic are closely linked to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Thus, for the purpose of this article, the sample includes the mentioned transcription of a subject with the following characteristics: female participant, 23 years old, comes from a countryside community of Durango, she and her intimate partner moved to Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, with the purpose of reaching a higher quality of life; four days before the interview, the participant experienced an episode of domestic physical violence.

Although it was difficult to identify the sample, we considered the relevance of the interviews to the goal of this study. The instruments were carefully designed in order to obtain the precise data needed for the present research. It was decided to obtain samples of conversation through cordial and respectful approaches to the topic of violence. Privacy was always assured in terms of the recorded contents. In all the interviews, the interviewees were cooperative and willing to collaborate, and, precisely because of their resistance to talk about violence, it contributed valuable information to the analysis of negation processes (our object of study). The fact that the same interview procedures were used for the entire sample, allowed for the identification of similarities of grammar and experiences mentioned by these women.

Theoretical basis for the present research

The analysis of denial mechanisms is based on contributions of Benveniste, Freud, Ducrot, and Jakobson, among other authors. Towards understanding 'discourse' as the language fulfillment in a specific enunciation act, in the present study, the following have been considered:

- (a) The unrepeatability of each enunciation act transforms language into discourse (Benveniste, 1977: 82).
- (b) It is important to differentiate between 'text' —the underlying structure— and 'discourse' —a communicative practice in which enunciation encompasses the specific situation where each sentence is emitted (Rodríguez Alfano, 2004: 93).
- (c) Some strategies for discursive evasion (such as negation) are evident in the implicit level of discourse.

To understand some of the mechanisms of the implicit level of discourse, it is useful to review Freudian theoretical conceptions. One of the most closely related to discursive denial psychoanalysis proposals is interpretation of dreams. According to this theory, in order to identify the meaning of hidden dreamlike thoughts, which have been submitted to a strong censorship, it is necessary to focus on symbolic indicators in discourse. In this respect, Freud claims: "word-presentation are residues of memories; they were at one time

perceptions and, like all mnemonic residues, they can become conscious again;” and the explanation is that: “only something which has once been a conscious perception can become conscious, and anything arising from within (apart from feelings), that seeks to become conscious, must try to transform itself into external perceptions: this becomes possible by means of memory-traces (Freud, 1978: 3954).

According to these Freudian postulates (1978, 3957), language is manifested in the form of words, which attains consciousness. That is, through words, we perceive what is in the unconscious, and, as Freud (1978: 3954) claims, the formations of thought, leading to chains of words. Access to these words provides evidence of the internal conflicts of the subject, as well as their repressed forms, through linguistic formations such as stress and intensity.

As a result of this process, every human being has critical checkpoints (linguistic indicators which appear in certain situations) that allow the easy detection of mnemonic traces, since they make possible their transition from inside the unconscious, to the conscious. And, when verbalizing experiences, the speaker can reveal, among other unconscious contents, some sensorial-originated memories evoked from a visual impression, or from an acoustic perception.

As it relates to our specific object of study, Freud maintains: “Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed. We can see how the intellectual function is separated from the affective process;” and he adds: “To negate something in a judgement is, at bottom, to say: ‘This is something which I should prefer to repress’” (Freud, 1978, 4141).

In the same way, Clapp & García state that discursive denial and its linguistic elements are enigmatic, because it always retains some implicit content (2013: 134). They describe the problem of negative existentials, which are described in logical analysis as the type of propositions as “Santa does not exist” where the inexistence of a referent (when the ‘referent’ designates an existent in external world object) is stated; and propose that, in order to solve the problem, on describing denial it is absolutely obligatory to analyze the linguistic elements in its relation to the situational context. This proposal has been taken in the present research to explain the use of deictic elements in interviewee’s negations.

Following Benveniste (1977), deictic elements have been understood as unconscious traces whose referent need to be identified in the context of interview situation, since its reference is only fully interpreted in a language event. This means that they only acquire referential meaning within the speech situation where they are uttered in a specific context, where the reference point is always the speech addressor. When someone says ‘I’, the receptor knows who the referent of this pronouns is, and the space and time coordinates (as in ‘far away’, ‘near’, ‘here’, ‘yesterday’ ‘tomorrow’, etc.) are also identified. The deictic indicators that appear in discursive denial show important data about the evasion of topics related to violence in domestic environment.

Furthermore, the deictic elements, the suppositions that, according to Ducrot (1986), carry the literal meaning charged in a variety of culturally significant ways, are also considered. Thus, suppositions could be conceived as an “inherent context” of the specific enunciation event. The implicit sense is partially expressed in the non-told, as the presupposed contents of linguistic elements. As this content is not a subject to any objection, it allows the possibility, for the speaker, to guide the interpretation, and for the receiver, to infer the meaning of what she/he is listening to or reading (Ducrot, 1986: 14, 27).

For Dominique Maingueneau (2014: 2), discourse is also understood as a verbal production, a process that is constituted by a linguistic unit by a series of sentences, “*La notion de discours est employée avec des acceptions très variées*” (Maingueneau, 1984: 1), (The notion of discourse is used with a varied meanings/ Trad. Cortes and Rodríguez), It is variable because of its practice of contextualizing texts, language in use, the situated production of speech acts or a turn-taking practice. On the other hand, Foucault, quoted by Maingueneau, conceives discourse as: “*Un ensemble de règles anonymes, historiques, toujours déterminés dans le temps et l’espace qui ont défini à une époque donnée, et pour une aire sociale, économique, géographique ou linguistique donnée, les conditions d’exercice de la fonction énonciative.*” (A set of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in time and space that defined for a given time, social, economic, geographical or linguistic area, the conditions for the exercise of the enunciable function) (Foucault, 1984, quoted by Maingueneau, 2014: 2, / Trad. Dina Cortes and Rodríguez).

In a similar way, our own definition of speech focuses on discourse as a process that involves the unconscious resembling, approaching its representation in language; and that also includes social, economic and historical contexts of discourse production and reception.

II. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Based on the theoretical proposals, the following **research propositions** have been constructed and submitted to evaluate discursive denial: (1) the physically abused women whose discourse is analyzed have learned to categorize domestic violence as a “must not tell” topic; (2) the denial process implies censorship to any reference to gender-based violence against women by their intimate partner; (3) such gender-based violence

could be useful to identify some unconscious traces that could appear in the words they use to talk about this topic; (4) the interpretations of their experiences need to be inferred on the basis of the analysis of the various ways (explicit or implicit) of negation/denial presented in the interview dialogue; and (5) among other unconscious traces, discursive denial is connoted through the multiple modalities (as below defined) to which the speaker can opt to formulate language in an unintentional process.

The techniques of data collection used in this research are:

1. The case studies, based on Stake's (1998). This strategy allowed the access to the government assistance center in order to observe and establish a profile of the participants; and it is relevant to mention that the assistance center supported this research under the condition of keeping the integrity of the victims safe.

Once the field observation process and the selection of the participants was made, the next step of the research procedure was the development of the following tool.

2. The semi-structured and in-depth interview was planned and recorded following the proposals of Martinez Rodriguez (2011), and Lopez Estrada and Deslauriers (2011: 10). This tool elicited the direct involvement of the participants' private life, focusing on specific violence content. Its' semi-structured nature permitted the following of a previous designed outline. However, the open framework allowed the interviewer to improvise new questions derived from the answers of the participants. In addition it facilitated cooperation and the intended recollection of discourse samples. The length of the interviews varied between an hour and an hour and a half.

Robert Stake contends that the above approach motivates the person who has had a recent negative experience to be cooperative in an interview. This is due to "the fact that they like their story to be known" (1998: 55). This cooperative disposition has been evident in the analyzed discourse of our interviewees. When planning the questions, the direct mention of the topic of physical violence was avoided in order to reduce their tendency to hide their experiences. In addition, to protect the integrity of the participants, it was decided to attach the regulation of the Victims General Law (2014), and the Women's Access to a Violence-Free Life General Law (2017), which supports their anonymity. Therefore, personal data such as names or nicknames are omitted in the transcription of oral discourse.

Moreover, the level of language used by the interviewer was taken into account. Following Sacau, Oliveira and Morais (2015: 2), the use of technical language was avoided, as this methodological strategy helps to prevent a poorly guided interview, and avoids negative effects and the interviewee's misinterpretation of what she is asked about. A conversational style was planned in order to obtain the most appropriate data needed to identify and comprehend all types of indicators of violence negation.

III. ANALYSIS OF NEGATION

The analysis focuses on three indicators of denial: implicits, modals, and deictic elements, and it is applied to various Excerpts of the interviewee's discourse.

Excerpt 1:

- 46 E: Oh okay / and then what happened?
47 M4: Well {subr. Problems} / jealousy
48 E: About what?
49 M4: Mmmmm because supposedly I had another couple [an affair?]
(Cortes-Rodríguez/Trads.)

On line 47, the interviewee highlights the word "problems." Following Freud (1978: 3954), this phonic feature could be seen as a mnemonic residue from some past experience which could become conscious again, in form of language. Evidence for this interpretation is on line 49, where the interviewee starts answering the question (48) about her intimate partner's jealousy, by verbalizing a phatic element (Mmmmm). This non-semantic utterance could be interpreted (after Freud, 1978: 3954) as a signal of her doubt about whether to reveal something or keep it unsaid, something she would want to repress. Next, she uses the modal adverb "supposedly" which implies (as referred by Ducrot, 1986) that the jealousy is founded only on a supposition, and not in a real fact. And, by doing so, the discursive assumption is the lack of violence justification. This way to avoid an explicit approach to the theme of violence constitutes a negation strategy.

Excerpt 2:

- 70 E: Didn't he study something?
71 M4: No // but he had another job / I mean {a. \he stole}.
72 E: Did he have a job? On what?

73 M4: On stealing
(Cortes- Rodríguez/ Trads.)

The analysis of this excerpt has provided the following data:

- On 71, there are five sense indicators:

- The first one is the negative adverb (no) used to deny that the man in question had acquired any formal education.
- The adversative ‘but’ denies any supposition about the negative consequences this condition could carry on.
- In the usage of imperfect past time (in ‘he had’), the underlying supposition is that the referred action was fulfilled in the past;
- The adjective “another” applied to the noun ‘job’ implies that it was a complementing occupation of a principal one;
- After announcing an auto-correction by using the explanation discourse marker ‘I mean’, the speaker guides the interviewer interpretation on the basis of an insinuation that there is a “real job” which is complemented by “another one”, this is, to steal; and
- The word "stole" is expressed in a low voice, thus, according to Freud (1978: 3954), it means something she wants to forget or avoid.

- On 73, all these implicit contents become explicit.

- The message that it was communicated on the whole in both lines (71, 73) reflects a proposition that seems to be assumed by the speaker at the level of unconscious deontic logic: “the man in the family is obligated to provide the economic livelihood at home, but it does not matter how he accomplishes it.”

Excerpt 3:

74 E: He stole!
75 M4: Or maybe he still steals // I don’t know [she stops crying]
76 E: Really? Since he was there? ¿Since he was in Durango?
77 M4: Yes since // since I was a teenager /
78 E: Wow! And when you met him / Did you know that?
79 M4: I didn’t know because we don’t come from the same place {a./ not from the same community!}
(Cortes- Rodríguez/ Trads.)

In this excerpt, the negation discursive strategies appear in three lines:

- On 75, the interviewee modifies her interlocutor’s subjacent assumption, which is marked by the use of past tense in ‘stole’. By the introduction of the coordinating conjunction ‘or’, the modal adverb ‘maybe’, and the negative epistemic mode corresponding to “I don’t know,” the speaker changes modality, from alethic mode to a possibility mode. As a result, she opens the interpretation, from one referring to an action executed in the past, to an action that is still being executed. And it is relevant that, as she uses these rhetoric-discursive strategies, her weeping stops.

- On 77, she expresses an assertion without any doubt, assuming the alethic-epistemic modal compromise.

- On 79, the interviewee denies her knowledge of facts in the past, and tries to justify it; and by the usage of these rhetoric-discursive strategies, as in 75, the epistemic modal compromise is evaded and, once again, she leaves a deontic supposition in the implicit level, that is: “to steal is not a real job.”

Excerpt 4:

84 E: In Durango / and also mm your parents were like that I mean==
85 M4: No not my parents | {\ they taught me to respect myself}
86 E: mmj
87 M4: {\Not my parents} / in my family that has never be seen.
(Cortes- Rodríguez/ Trads.)

Excerpt 4 includes two dialogue turns (lines 85 and 87), and its discourse analysis provides the following data:

- At 85, the interviewee interrupts the interviewer’s speech turn, and lowers the volume of voice at the time she refers to her childhood education. By doing so, both are revealed: her interiorized conviction (probably shared with her interlocutor) about “parents obligation to teach self-respect to their children;” and her assumption of a respective deontic modal compromise.

- In contrast, interviewer’s references on 87 go back to the topic focused on before and provide evidences of the strategy described by Lenny Clapp (2013: 135) as a way to deny through the use of the negative quantifier and temporal deictic ‘never.’

- The explicit negation marks which appear in both speech turns could reveal, according to Freud's proposals, a speaker's desire to avoid the revival of a negative violence experience, by focusing on a less painful topic, the action of stealing, in which the speaker has not participated.

Excerpt 5:

88 E: Not violence / or anything?
89 M4: Violence yes /
90 E: Yes?
91 M4: But not that
92 E: What kind of violence?
93 M4: \ That my dad used to beat my {mom} pp.
94 E: To your mom
95 M4: Yes || I remember / when / when he beat her
(Cortes- Rodríguez/ Trads.)

Excerpt 5 illustrates again how the interviewee deviates the conversational topic as a rhetorical strategy to evade any reference to her experience as a victim of gender violence:

- On 89, the interviewee does not answer the question indirectly placed by the interviewer in which some approach to the topic to personal experience on gender violence was expected. Instead, she refers to the general concept by the explicit affirmation ("Violence yes"), assuming the alethic compromise with only one part of the truth she was trying to hide, since it is revealed in her next speech turn.
- On 91, the interviewee introduces the adversative conjunction "but," that modifies the previous answer. Here another aspect of the denial that shows the Freud's proposal (1978: 24) is indicated. Its claim is that denial is present with the redirection of the topic. On emitting the phrase "but not that," the speaker shows her resistance to talk about the gender violence executed by her intimate partner.
- On 93, M4 explicitly refers her father's habit of beating her mother, but does not talk about her personal experience.

IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the previous analysis, it is possible to notice that psychoanalysis and discourse analysis facilitate the examination of the linguistic and paralinguistic elements expressed in interviews. Together, both theoretical bases have been useful to study the denial process voiced by a woman who has experienced physical violence from her intimate partner.

The above description of discursive denial has been inferred from the analysis of linguistic and paralinguistic features, which indicate either the assumption of modal alethic, epistemic or deictic compromises, or rhetorical procedures to evade these commitments.

To accomplish an exhaustive analysis of discursive denial, this study focuses on the following linguistic features: deictic marks, suppositions or implied contents, as well as adverbial and other modal logic indicators. Also the message modification caused by the introduction of crying, sobs, and silences was considered, as it is described in the following insights:

- Among the deictic marks, which are present in the M4 discursive mechanisms of denial, the more relevant ones are those elements that increase the spatial and time distance from the speaker. On her participation in dialogue, she avoids speaking about her personal experience and focuses on: either the topic of stealing, violence in a general perspective, or the violence executed by her father against her mother, and she never describes the violent behavior against her from her intimate partner.
- In the denying process, the attempt of the speaker to avoid the alethic and epistemic modal commitments is evidenced by means of what must be accepted as "truth" and her knowledge about it; instead, she assumes belief according to what should be done or how it is obligatory to behave, to be accepted as a member of a group.
- The examination of both implicit forms (supposition and implication, as defined by Ducrot, 1986) conveyed to us the value scale and some beliefs that were learned by M4 in her childhood and are shared among those in her sociocultural group. Through the adhesion to those suppositions: first, M4 minimizes violence and maximizes the action of stealing; next, she justifies her intimate partner's jealousy; and, therefore, in an implicit way, she attempts to persuade the interviewer that these actions were because he loved her.

A general observation is that M4 avoids the topic about her personal experience of gender violence. Thus, it can be acknowledged, following Freud (1978: 253), that, as part of the process of the formulation of language, discursive denial is a repressed thought representation. The first indicator in this sense is the abrupt change of topic that allows the speaker to avoid these memories of negative experiences, enclosed in the

unconscious mind, to reach consciousness. And the rhetorical strategies for evading the topic are the indirect indicator of what the victims cannot literally say.

Finally, as a result of this preliminary study, a research hypothesis could be formulated referring to the possibility of patriarchal rules that could also regulate the use of language and guides the speakers to identify the context of what is or is not appropriate to say, specifically in matters of domestic violence practices. The next phases of this research could be oriented to support or reject this hypothesis.

Notes

According to the latest survey conducted by INEGI (to the “Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía” (INEGI), at the end of 2011 (ENDIREH-2011), 47% of the female population of 15 years and older married or in consensual union are abused by their intimate partner.

² An antecedent of this article is a study, which is part of Cortes’ doctoral dissertationthesis called “Discursive denial as a strategy and indicator of gender violence towards women.” The general hypothesis in this thesis is that physically abused women try to deny their experiences; and the main objective is to identify the way they place the denial in oral discourse. Paralinguistic elements, such as: tone of voice, voice variations, crying, etc., have already been studied, while the study of linguistic features is in process, which considers among other elements: modal and deictic marks and discursive implicit (supposition and implied meaning).

³The symbols used in this article include: brief pause /, long pause //, downward tone \, long silence <secs.>, emphasis subr., lengthening of a sound ::, low voice p, very low voice pp, overlap ==, no-lexical phenomena [], indicator of an interesting phenomena for the analysis { }, and unintelligible word ().

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