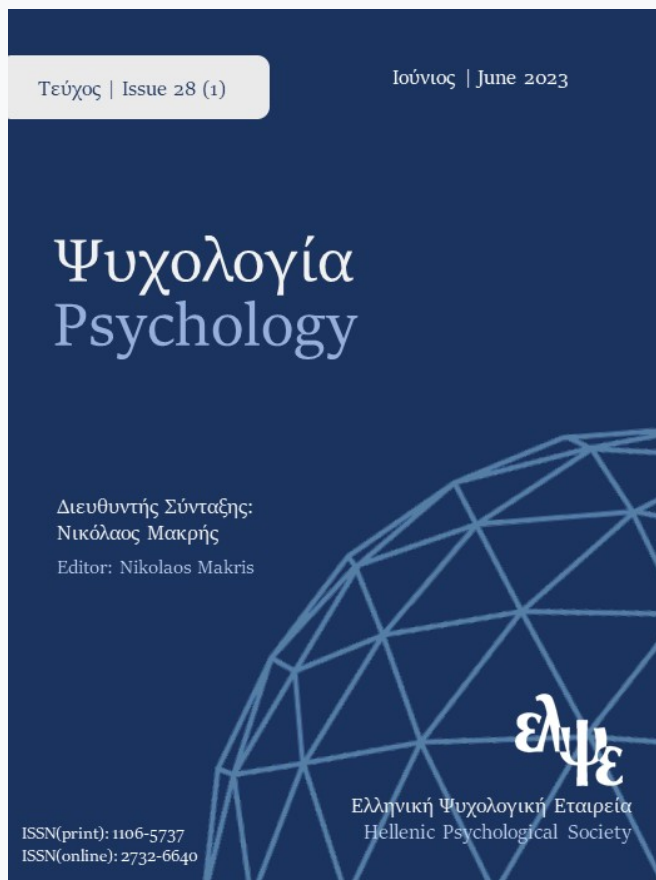


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# The discourse of resistance against spoken sexism

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## KEYWORDS

Spoken sexism,  
Post-structuralism,  
Foucauldian discourse analysis,  
feminist discourse

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## ABSTRACT

Spoken sexism, which remains up to this day a heavily understudied phenomenon, contributes incessantly to the preservation of patriarchy while reinforcing misogyny and sex-based oppression. The present paper focuses on how women discursively construct sexist comments as a cause for reaction, drawing upon a discourse of resistance, while sculpting a combative subject position. The 30 women who participated in the study took part voluntarily in individual semi-structured interviews, in order to share their views and experiences in relation to spoken sexism. For the analyses of the material, post-structuralism was taken as epistemological approach, while a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was used for the portrayal of the discourses. Due to the gendered nature of the subject under discussion and in acknowledgement that spoken sexism is discursively constructed within patriarchal structures of power, a feminist perspective was upheld in relation to the interpretation and discussion of the results. The findings reveal not only the resilient nature of sex-based oppression but also an increase in awareness as well as responsibility regarding the issue of spoken sexism.

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## Introduction

During the 4th wave of feminism and the #metoo era, being a feminist woman went from taboo to something that was encouraged. Since the movement began, millions of individuals have shown their support for it through online tweets, rallies, and other forms of activism, amplifying the voices of women who have shared their experiences regarding sexual assault (Lisnek et al., 2022). Thus, more and more women found the strength and the support to speak up against the violence, harassment, oppression, and discrimination they face simply for being women (Peroni & Rodak, 2020).

However, the aforementioned encouragement was only but ephemeral. It appears that to some, women's empowerment around sexual assault and gender-based violence is threatening to men. In detail, the fact that women started to be taken seriously and found a "voice" is seen as a threat to existing patriarchal power structures (Lisnek et al., 2022). Be that as it may, the recent overturn of *Roe v Wade* in the US (see Lewandowska, 2022; Sun, 2022) along with the restrictive abortion laws in EU countries like Italy and Poland (see Bielska - Brodziak, et al., 2020) are a few examples of the neopatriarchal backlash against women's rights and freedoms and of course against feminism itself.

Despite the progress of the feminist movement, women continue to face sex-based oppression, which negatively affects their lives and their well-being (Taylor, 2020). Even though most women are not direct victims of physical or sexual violence, all of them live and function within an environment that distorts their personalities, limits their potential and threatens both their physical as well as their mental health (Berg, 2006). The oppression of women is actualized and maintained via numerous means and practices. One such practice is spoken language that people use for their everyday interactions when communicating with one another and expressing themselves. Everyday speech offers a plethora of lexical resources that contribute to the perpetuation of male dominance while restricting women by imposing stereotypical sex-roles that function to discredit and

oppress them even further (Mills, 2008; Sunderland, 2004). Such language-in-use is understood to be sexist (McPhillips & Speer, 2015).

The consequences of physical and sexual violence on women have been examined to a significant degree (Chrisler & Ferguson, 2006; Goodman et al., 1993; Pemberton & Loeb, 2020; Taylor, 2020). For most women, however, it is these subtle everyday forms of sexism that prevail in their day-to-day lives (Berg, 2006). For example, it has been found that everyday incidents of sexism, such as sexist comments, can negatively affect women's well-being (Hosang & Bhui, 2018). In detail, sexist remarks can cause anger, intense anxiety and negatively affect a person's self-image and self-confidence, occasionally leading to eating disorders (Garaigordobil & Maganto, 2013; Swim et al., 2001). Furthermore, sexist discourse can negatively influence women's sense of belonging and make them refrain from engaging in roles that are not in line with the traditional gender stereotypes (de Lemus & Estevan-Reina, 2021). At the same time, many women internalize sexist ideology and self-objectify, resulting in emotional distress (Becker & Sibley, 2016; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2009).

It should be noted that the psychological consequences of sexist remarks differ depending on whether they are hostile or benevolent in nature. Relevant research shows that hostile sexist statements and sexist comments can cause significant stress, anger, and discomfort, negatively affecting women's mental health (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998). At the same time, benevolent sexist remarks can also provoke anger (Bosson et al., 2010) as well as self-objectification and body shame (Calogero & Jost, 2011). For instance, benevolent compliments about women's bodies and weight can cause discomfort when it comes to their body image (Calogero et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has been found that benevolent sexist remarks can impair cognitive functioning and performance, while they are also associated with ruminative thoughts of incompetency (Dardenne et al., 2007, 2013).

### ***To act or not to act? Researching how women respond to sexist comments***

On many occasions, sexist comments constitute an everyday reality for women who find themselves in the difficult position of deciding if and how they are going to react to them (i.e., ignore them, answer back, etc.) (Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Shelton et al., 2006). This decision becomes even more challenging when it comes to benevolent sexist comments, given that it is not always so easy to be taken as sexism (Becker & Swim, 2012; Connor et al., 2017; Davidson et al., 2015). In other words, in order to have a reaction, the person who receives a comment must first evaluate if it is sexist in nature or not (Ashburn-Nardo & Karim, 2019).

The present paper focuses on how women discursively construct spoken sexism as a cause for reaction, drawing upon a discourse of resistance. To begin with, relevant research has shown that there are individual as well as situational factors that affect the way a woman will choose to respond (Adams-Roy & Barling, 1998; Ayres et al., 2009; Kaiser & Miller 2004; Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Sommers, 2011), rendering this decision to a crucial issue for women (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Even though an immediate and direct response against spoken sexism is of critical importance regarding the deconstruction of gender-based oppression, it also entails dangers (i.e., retaliation from the person who makes the sexist comment, backlash) that should be taken into consideration (Dodd et al. 2001; Shelton & Stewart 2004; Stangor et al. 2002; Swim and Hyers, 1999).

On many occasions, women choose to ignore a sexist comment and give no answer back (di Gennaro & Ritschel, 2019; Farmer & Smock Jordan, 2017). It has been found that even though, in hypothetical scenarios, women state that they would speak up against spoken sexism, it is far more likely for them to remain silent in real-life interactions (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Swim et al., 2010). Furthermore, women may decide to remain silent even when they do realize that a certain comment is sexist (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). However, that does not necessarily mean that they accept it or that they are indifferent toward it, as there can be a variety of reasons behind their silence.

A very prevalent reason behind women's decision not to speak up against spoken sexism is fear of backlash (Bergman et al., 2002; Brake, 2005; Crosby, 1993; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Good et al., 2019; Haslett & Lipman, 1997; Latting, 1993). In detail, it has been found that women evaluate that answering back when facing a sexist comment could potentially be more dangerous than ignoring it and remaining silent, depending on various situational factors (Ayres et al., 2009; Dodd et al. 2001; Good et al., 2019; Kaiser & Miller 2004; Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999). For example, if a woman chooses to speak up against sexist comments that she

receives from her boss at work, she risks getting fired, which can have severe financial consequences and thus, she is being forced to say nothing (Kaiser & Miller, 2004).

Furthermore, whether a woman will decide to answer back or not is related to the nature of the sexist comment. For example, it has been found that women will most likely remain silent when a sexist comment is sexual in nature (Ayres et al., 2009; Hill & Kearnl, 2011) or when it takes place within a humoristic context (Good et al., 2019). In addition, when examining women's reactions to sexist comments, one should take into account the relationship between the conveyor and the recipient. Relevant research showed that women will respond more easily if they know the person that makes the comment but, at the same time, they will also be more affected by it exactly because it comes from a person they are familiar with and potentially trust (Ayres et al., 2009).

Another reason that affects the way women will choose to act regarding sexist comments is related to the self-image they want to preserve and present to other people who are present. To elaborate, it has been found that women who answer back to sexist comments are seen as troublemakers, rude or hypersensitive, wanting to exaggerate their reactions in order to get attention (Becker et al., 2011; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Dodd et al., 2001; Eliezer & Major, 2012; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003). Be that as it may, women may choose an alternative form of reaction (humor, sarcasm, gestures), avoiding communicating their discomfort and displeasure directly (Becker et al., 2014; Woodzicka, et al., 2020). On the other hand, women who adopt a feminist identity and wish to contribute to the fight for gender equality are far more likely to openly speak up for themselves in an effort to bring social change (Ayres et al., 2009; Cowan et al. 1992; Crosby, 1993; Fischer et al. 2000; Liss et al. 2004; McCabe, 2005; Swim & Hyers, 1999; Zucker, 2004).

Confronting spoken sexism and other forms of sex-based discrimination can help significantly on an individual as well as on a social level when it comes to the deconstruction of the power structures of gender (Kaiser & Miller, 2004). To begin with, speaking up against sexist comments can lead to their decrease as it makes their conveyors think twice about what they say (Hyers, 2007; Mallett & Wagner, 2011). Additionally, when spoken sexism is publicly denounced, its sexist and discriminatory nature becomes more easily recognizable, which adds to its prevention and thus reinforces the effort for gender equality and social change (Becker & Swim, 2011; Crosby, 1993; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp et al., 2006; Mallett & Wagner, 2011). At the same time, answering back at sexist comments helps create a safe environment of empathy and understanding which encourages more and more women to speak up without fear of retaliation. In detail, it has been found that women feel more comfortable answering back when they are surrounded by other people who support them, especially other women (Stangor et al., 2002).

Furthermore, when a woman speaks up against spoken sexism, she abandons the position of a passive listener, which is in line with her stereotypical gender-role, and in contrast, she adopts the position of an active speaker against discrimination (Crosby, 1993). This form of facing sexist comments can be very empowering for women as it boosts their confidence while offering them a sense of justice and control (Gervais et al., 2010; Hyers, 2007; Swim & Thomas, 2005). Additionally, facing spoken sexism with dynamism and decisiveness brings even more personal gains on a psychological level. In more detail, women, who speak up against sexist comments with determination or even anger, report better psychological well-being in comparison to women who choose more temperate forms of response or focus only on "educating" the conveyors of such comments about sex-based discrimination (Dickter et al., 2012; Foster, 2013).

### ***Aims of the present study***

The existing research, regarding how women would potentially face sexist comments in their everyday interactions, has either been of quantitative or experimental methods (i.e. hypothetical scenarios), (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). In contrast, the relevant qualitative research that focuses on the narratives of women regarding how they cope with sexist comments in their daily life is limited at best (Ayres et al., 2009; Gruber & Smith, 1995; Kaiser & Miller 2004). Furthermore, it has been found that women speak up against sexist comments in real life to a much lesser degree in relation to how they believed they would react when asked in hypothetical scenarios or vignettes (Kawakami et al., 2019; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001).

Taking that into consideration, the present study aimed to overcome these limitations. To begin with, the study is qualitative in nature, focusing on women's discourse whereby giving them the chance to communicate their conceptualizations and apprehensions regarding spoken sexism. More specifically, given the negative effects of spoken sexism on women's well-being, the present study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the

experiences of women, with the ultimate objective being to obtain new knowledge as to how women discursively shape their resistance against spoken sexism, constructing it as a cause for reaction. Furthermore, it creates an opportunity for them to share their lived experiences regarding the commonplace phenomenon of having to deal with sexist comments even when engaging in everyday activities as simple as walking down the street.

### ***Method***

The nature as well as the objectives of the research question led to the selection of a qualitative approach. In detail, a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was employed in order to explore the conceptual discursive constructions of spoken sexism while providing the necessary space for diverse and subjective opinions concerning sexist comments to be heard, acknowledging all of them to be of equal value and importance. The present paper focuses exclusively on the discursive construction of spoken sexism as a cause for reaction, emanating from a discourse of resistance, which operates within a broader feminist ideology. The results presented here are a part of the first author's doctoral thesis on discursive constructions of spoken sexism. The analyses in their totality revealed more discursive constructions deriving from other sometimes opposing discourses (i.e., the discourse of hegemonic masculinity), leading to alternative subject positions.

The study took place at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, between the years 2016-2021. It was conducted in accordance with the research ethics protocols as defined by the research committee of Aristotle University. The authors received no financial support from any funding agency for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

### ***Participants and recruitment***

Interviews were conducted with thirty women, aged 18-45 years old, who had experienced sexist comments (purposive sampling). In the beginning, a small pool of initial informants was asked to nominate potential participants through their social networks, leading to subsequent snowballing. All participants were adults, their participation was voluntary and pro bono and their informed consent was obtained in writing prior to interviews. The recruitment process continued until data saturation was accomplished, reaching a total number of 30 interviews. When it comes to more detailed demographic information, four participants were university students, four were unemployed, and the rest of them were employed. Except the students, the rest of the participants were tertiary education graduates. Furthermore, eight participants were in a relationship, ten were single, and the rest of them were married. Lastly, seven of them had children. To uphold anonymity, no further demographics are presented.

### ***Materials***

A semi-structured interview guide consisting of twenty-two questions was designed and then piloted for the purposes of the present research. The questions were open-ended and covered the various forms that spoken sexism can take (i.e., humour, compliments, insults, etc.). Informed consent forms were also designed and provided to the participants, containing detailed information regarding the aims of the study, the procedure, anonymity, protection of sensitive information, and voluntary participation. The contact details of the researchers were also clearly stated on the consent form.

### ***Procedure***

All the interviews took place in private environments, minimizing the occurrence of random distractions as much as possible. The women who were interviewed were asked to share their experiences, their views, and their understanding of sexist comments in everyday spoken language. Great attention was paid to how participants cope with sexist comments in their everyday life, as well as to the impact that such comments have on them. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed with the participants' consent verbatim. Following transcription, each interview was carefully read while listening to the recorded audio in order to ensure accuracy and achieve familiarization with the data prior to analysis. Additionally, each interviewee was given a unique alias to ensure anonymity.

The transcripts of the interviews were then analyzed following Willig's (2013) six stages of FDA. At first, the women's narratives were read several times, whereby the focus was on 'spoken sexism' as the discursive object. All implicit but also explicit references to the discursive object were identified systematically. Thoughts and ideas that were relevant to the research questions were noted on the transcripts and the discursive object of spoken sexism was examined for variability and consistency in the narratives of the participants (Willig, 2013). Following that, the next step was to locate the discursive constructions of spoken sexism within wider discourses as well as how the participants positioned themselves and others within them. The discourses that were identified were then explored in terms of subjectivity (i.e., how they were experienced by the participants) and analyzed in relation to their impact on gendered structures of power within patriarchal societies and on social practices. This was followed by a closer inspection of the context within which the discursive constructions of spoken sexism were deployed, paying attention to their potential implications on a social and political level. Next, the focus shifted toward the subject positions that the women who participated in the study upheld in relation to the identified discourses. Then, as directed by the suggested FDA stages, the relationships between discourses and practices, as well as the relationships between discourses and subjectivity, were carefully examined (Willig, 2013).

### ***Reflexivity and transparency***

In acknowledgement that personal assumptions, interests, beliefs, and experiences could potentially influence the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013), great consideration was given to the subject of critical reflection, in an effort to minimize the impact of personal biases on the interpretation of the research material. Additionally, being that the present paper is part of a doctoral thesis, close guidance, and consultation were provided by the main supervisor (second author) throughout all the stages of the research process, especially in relation to the identifications of the discourses and subject positions. Alternative ideas and understandings were thoroughly discussed which led to the interpretations of certain narratives being accordingly modified. Furthermore, consultation was sought from the doctoral counselling committee. The results were also discussed with some participants, who were asked to provide us with feedback regarding our analysis. The comments received were particularly encouraging as to the accurate understanding of their experiences in relation to the sexist comments. On that note, it is important to keep in mind that the results of this qualitative study concern the experiences of the participants in a given time and space.

## **Results**

Drawing upon a discourse of resistance that operates within a broader feminist ideology and aims at the deconstruction of gender-based power structures of oppression, the women who participated in the study constructed discursively spoken sexism as cause for reaction. In detail, the women explained in their interviews that they react by answering back every time they face sexist comments in everyday interactions, regardless of context. The aforementioned discursive construction is presented through selected narrative extracts followed by the corresponding subject position.

In the first extract, Daphne (age 29) when asked about humoristic sexist comments, responded:

“R: Would you characterize them too as sexist?”

Daphne: Absolutely! Absolutely! Absolutely! But I believe that most women would answer back with humor and drop the subject.

R: Whereas what would you do?

Daphne: Whereas I answer back. I don't just drop it anymore. I used to do so in the past. Not anymore. You know, some women even have told me, and it really makes an impression on me /“just drop it”/ (mockingly). Well, I won't do it. I don't know if this is something positive or negative, but to me it is positive. The fact that I answer back. Due to the fact that I endured plenty for a long time, about five years ago or so. I endured plenty of such comments from my ex-husband: “Go vacuum, off with you, go do the dishes”. So, I no longer tolerate such things”.

Daphne begins her narration by strongly confirming (Absolutely! Absolutely! Absolutely!) that sexist comments, even within a humoristic context, constitute spoken sexism and discrimination. Whereby, it seems

that to her neither the context nor the intentions play a significant role. In other words, the fact that a sexist comment is said in a humorous way does not mean that it is not perceived as sexist. However, she does not seem to believe that most women share her views, stating that they would probably answer with humor and simply drop the subject. When asked about what she would do, Daphne answers emphatically that she answers back, revealing resistance on her part. In detail, Daphne separates herself from other women who seem to adopt a more moderate or even passive position. On the contrary, through her narrative, she depicts herself as an empowered woman who answers back when it comes to sexist comments: “I don’t just drop it anymore”. In this case, Daphne appears to go against the traditional stereotypes concerning the gendered role of women and takes it upon herself to defend her position. In spite of the fact that she has faced critique from other women, she emphasizes, in her narrative, that the fact that she answers back is something positive to her. In other words, she appears to be satisfied with how she has chosen to cope with sexist comments.

Following that, Daphne explains her reasons for answering back when facing spoken sexism. She begins by explaining that it hasn’t always been so, which shows insight and self-awareness on her part. In this case, there has been a shift in her attitude and behaviour which stemmed from past experiences related to her ex-husband: I endured plenty of such comments from my ex-husband: “Go vacuum, off with you, go do the dishes”. At this point in her narrative Daphne puts forward a series of insolent sexist comments related to the traditional gender role of women as housewives. It appears, however, that Daphne no longer relates to such a gender role and thus, she rejects it and then comments: “I no longer tolerate such things”. Her answer shows determination and drive, showing that she is no longer willing to take a step back. In other words, it appears that her past experiences in her marriage led her to reconsider her attitude, to empower herself by acquiring self-resilience, and to react by no longer accepting sexist comments silently.

In the next extract, when referring to spoken sexism, Elisa (age 30) states:

“R: How do you deal with such comments?

Elisa: I get so very angry! I feel injustice ((sighs)) I intervene. If it is something that takes room in my presence and therefore, I am responsible since I hear it, I too have the responsibility according to my beliefs to intervene, I will speak up, I will argue, I will defend! For example, someone had said about a woman, that she does not care about her looks, not her hygiene mind you, her looks, that she should fix her hair, her makeup, or how she dressed, that bit. And he told her “What kind of woman are you?” and “Are you a lesbian?” as if lesbians are aliens and not women! And I got so very angry and I argued with him about it”.

Right from the beginning of the extract, it becomes rather obvious that sexist comments cause a strong emotional reaction to Elisa: I get so very angry! I feel injustice. In her narrative, she states strongly that she intervenes when she faces sexist comments. In other words, she describes how she reacts against spoken sexism. Following that, she explains to the researcher her reasons for intervening when it comes to sexist comments. At this point, her narration becomes rather interesting as she starts by saying in passive voice “If it is something that takes room in my presence”. Based on the context it is easy to understand that she refers to sexist comments. By using passive voice, Elisa does not name a speaker, she does not name who could potentially make such a comment, whereby spoken sexism appears to be presented as something that just happens, without imputing the responsibility on someone for making such a comment. However, she goes on by saying: I am responsible since I hear it, I too have the responsibility according to my beliefs to intervene, I will speak up, I will argue, I will defend!”. By switching to active voice, she also places herself as responsible for taking action. The question that comes to mind, in this case when Elisa claims that she too is responsible, is who else should have the responsibility to intervene? One could argue that she now refers to the person who makes the sexist comment that was not named in the previous sentence. Alternatively, she could potentially refer to the person who receives the sexist comment, if one assumes that she is not the immediate recipient, as it becomes evident in the example that she narrates afterward. Drawing upon a discourse of resistance, Elisa explains that if she witnesses a sexist comment, it is her responsibility to react by intervening. Maybe this way, she wants to communicate that more attention should be given to speaking up against sexist comments instead of focusing on who makes them.

Next, when speaking about how she addresses spoken sexism she says: “I will speak up, I will argue, I will defend”. The verbs that she chooses to use in her narration show dynamism, empowerment and go against the traditional stereotypes regarding gender roles. In this case, drawing upon a discourse of resistance, Elisa seems to depict herself as a heroine who defends herself and other individuals against spoken sexism by taking the responsibility to act against it. The fact that she chooses to actively intervene becomes evident by the example

that she gives later on, in which she describes an incident where she became an indirect receiver of a sexist comment, leading to her arguing with the man who said it. This way, she appears to want to show through her discourse that she reacts, depicting herself as an empowered woman who resists spoken sexism.

In the next extract, Hermione (age 30) when asked about how she copes with spoken sexism, she responded:

“Hermione: I believe that all of us have the responsibility to speak up. Men have that responsibility too, if they hear something from women. I have the hope that maybe, if he thinks for a couple of minutes more what was it that he said, if it was right or wrong, maybe I trigger something this way. I get happy afterwards, that maybe it can be a motive to think before speaking next time.

R: I understand.

Hermione: /But I don’t know if it works/ (in low voice).

R: Would you say that you are affected by them?

Hermione: I get so very much upset, meaning that I will take the time to say “What are you saying to me? Why are you saying that?” And I will hear back something like “It was only a joke, don’t make a big deal out of it!”. Well, it is no joke! Yes, I have now reached this point. When I was younger, I didn’t answer back, I would say “Oyyy, drop it, forget about it”. Not anymore. Now I believe it is my responsibility”.

Hermione begins her narration by stating emphatically that it is everyone’s responsibility to answer back when it comes to sexist comments. This statement appears to be a call for action. Without mentioning the conveyors of sexist comments, she focuses instead on the responsibility of the recipients and of the beholders. This seems to reveal how important it is for Hermione to have some form of response against spoken sexism.

Following that, Hermione adds that men also have the responsibility to answer back, if they hear a sexist comment coming from a woman, whereby, she as a woman calls upon men to join the resistance against spoken sexism. This way, she appears to highlight that the issue of spoken sexism is not a women’s issue but rather everyone’s issue, displaying a will for solidarity among genders. Furthermore, Hermione expresses the hope that speaking up against sexism can function as food for thought to think twice before making such a comment again. In other words, she assumes that her way of coping with sexist comments can have a positive effect on the conveyors by encouraging them to reflect more and potentially change their behaviour, dissuading them from addressing such comments in the future. This prospect appears to make Hermione happy, who depicts herself as an agent of change. She seems to hope that her resistance against spoken sexism could bear fruit by encouraging the conveyors of sexist comments to reevaluate what they say. However, she expresses some doubts: But I don’t know if it works. In other words, she appears to be uncertain whether her words have a significant impact. One could argue that this doubt stems from the fact that sexist comments are so very well normalized in everyday spoken language, making Hermione wonder if her resistance has any substantial meaning. Be that as it may, Hermione continues to speak up by upholding a position of empowerment. Next in her narrative, Hermione shares her thoughts regarding how sexist comments affect her: “I get so very much upset”. This phrase reveals the strong emotional reaction that spoken sexism causes in her, constituting a cause for speaking up. At this point in her narrative, she narrates an example of a dialogue that could take place under such circumstances, with her asking for an explanation regarding spoken sexism: “What are you saying to me? Why are you saying that?”. By this example, she appears to want to challenge the conveyor of the sexist comment to reflect on what he/she said and take responsibility for it. Moving on, she answers to herself by voicing a rather banal response which could be representative of the responses that she usually gets in such situations: “It was only a joke, don’t make a big deal out of it!”. This type of answer resembles gaslighting and encourages her to adopt a more passive attitude and minimize the impact and seriousness of spoken sexism by not making a big deal out of it.

This hypothetical scenario appears to be enough to upset Hermione who says emphatically and in a loud voice that: “It is no joke”. At this point, Hermione clearly rejects humor as an excuse. In other words, she appears to believe that making a sexist comment within a humorous context is not a redeeming factor and rushes to add: “Yes, I have now reached this point. When I was younger, I didn’t answer back, I would say “okay, drop it, forget about it”. At this point, it becomes evident that Hermione has a good insight and awareness about this shift in her behaviour. In detail, she went from being passive to taking action: “Now I believe it is my responsibility”. One could argue that her experiences regarding sexist comments led her to empowerment and resilience, believing that speaking up against sexist comments is not a responsibility of hers.

In the last extract, Amelia (age 29), when asked about how she copes with sexist comments, replied:

“R: How do you usually cope with them (sexist comments)?



Amelia: Not very well, I am not particularly calm. Either when they insult me or people close to me, I don't follow a train of thought that says take it easy, not everyone...not everyone is informed, not everyone understands that what they say is insulting, I don't see it like that, I become very combative and aggressive. That.

R: When you say combative and aggressive, how do you mean?

Amelia: Yes, I answer back, I try to defend myself or any other person that is under attack and I believe it that I must defend them".

Just like with other participants, sexist comments cause a strong emotional reaction in Amelia as well: "I am not particularly calm". In detail, she states that under such circumstance, she is in no position to recognize any kind of redeeming factor to those who make sexist comments. On the contrary, her agitation is so fierce that leads her to revolt: "I become very combative and aggressive". This phrase reveals plenty of dynamism and empowerment from Amelia's part. By going against the gender-based stereotypes that dictate women to be passive and subordinate, she depicts herself as an empowered defender and as a heroine who shields not only herself but also others against spoken sexism. In this case, Amelia's line of defense is to attack back by becoming "combative" whereby the scale of her agitation regarding sexist comments becomes evident.

Furthermore, when referring to sexist comments, Amelia says: "either when they insult me or people close to me". In this case, she discursively constructs sexist comments as something insulting and also as a cause for action. Amelia narrates in active voice, showing that sexist comments do not just occur on their own but rather someone speaks them, insulting others. This way, she places the responsibility regarding spoken sexism on a person. Later on, she narrates: "I believe it that I must defend them". This phrase reveals a responsibility to take action. According to her narrative, Amelia answers back, argues, and defends, thinking that this is something she "must" do when facing sexist comments. In other words, she depicts herself as an agent of defense as well as of change against the prevalence of spoken sexism.

### ***Subject positioning***

When discursively constructing sexist comments as cause for reaction the women who participated in the research adopt a combative subject position, drawing upon a discourse of resistance that operates within a wider feminist ideology. By opposing the norms regarding women's gender role, the participants claimed through their discourse that they resist firmly and answer back when they face sexist comments. Furthermore, a sense of awareness regarding spoken sexism as well as a sense of responsibility regarding facing sexist comments becomes evident through their narrations, framing the combative subject position that they adopt as a moral obligation. According to their discourse, they choose to react by answering back every time they come across spoken sexism that is directed either toward them or toward others. Whereby, they show their opposition to the patriarchal structures of power, depicting themselves as "heroines" who defend not only themselves but also other women. Finally, yet importantly, the participants maintained their position regardless of contextual factors (i.e., humor), whereby expressing that they reject the subject of intention, while recognizing in all cases spoken sexism to be a form of patriarchal oppression and misogyny. Their discourse reveals once again a willingness for reaction and a moral reason to act when it comes to opposing spoken sexism. This also becomes evident through the combative subject position they adopt, portraying themselves as contemporary "heroines" who speak up.

### **Discussion**

Recognizing spoken sexism for what it is as well as taking up the responsibility to answer back prevailed in the narrations of the women who discursively constructed sexist comments as cause for reaction, drawing about a discourse of resistance. This discursive construction appears to be functioning within a broader feminist ideology, whereby the participants show opposition through their discourse against the patriarchal power structures in defense of women. Furthermore, by adopting a combative subject position, they discursively construct a moral obligation on their part to react, going against the stereotypical standards regarding the gender role of women and sending a clear message that spoken sexism will not be tolerated. This could potentially stem from social pressure if one considers the undeniable popularity and impact of the #metoo movement which emerged during the 4th wave of feminism.

To begin with, a shift in their position was evident through their narrations. At some point, having already experienced spoken sexism, the participants started to become better aware of its nature and chose to align with a more feminist ideology in terms of resistance through their discourse. In detail, even though they admit that they did not use to answer back in the past, they made it clear that this was no longer the case. In contrast, they profess that they consciously decided to speak up against spoken sexism when faced with it. Furthermore, they highlighted the fact that they would answer back in spite of the context. This finding was very important as it showed that the participants were not prepared to make excuses or ignore a sexist comment which might have been well-intentioned. On the contrary, it became clear in their interviews that they were prepared to answer back at any comment they understood to be sexist. Moreover, they insisted on trying to show that sexist comments are not acceptable and should not go unnoticed, despite their embedment in everyday spoken language. Through their discourse, they chose to fight back and defend themselves as well as others who endure sexist comments, resisting the gendered power structures which they reject as oppressive and anachronistic. This combative subject position from their part functions within the spectrum of feminist ideology in terms of opposition against sexism, showing decisiveness. Furthermore, it reveals a willingness for resistance as well as a moral obligation to react, which could originate in social pressure given the influence of the #metoo and the contemporary feminist movement. In their narratives, the participants appeared to have reached their limits and were no longer willing to turn a blind eye. Thus, they appear to depict themselves as modern-day “heroines” who speak up. This is in line with relevant research findings showing that women who align with the feminist ideology demonstrate more resistance and are ready to speak up against sexism (Ayres et al., 2009; Swim & Hyers, 1999).

This shift towards a decision on their part to start reacting was explained, in their interviews, as a sense of responsibility not only towards themselves but also towards other women in an effort to tackle spoken sexism and bring actual change. Through their combative subject position, the participants appeared to have developed a strong sense of awareness regarding spoken sexism and got better at understanding it as well as naming it for what it was. In their discourse, they professed themselves ready to react, defend and speak up in the hope that their actions would help spread awareness and tackle spoken sexism. On that note, relevant research has shown that speaking up against sexism can be extremely helpful when it comes to the facilitation of its recognition (Becker & Swim, 2011), while it contributes to diminishing the reproduction of sexist comments in everyday spoken language (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp et al., 2006; Mallett & Wagner, 2011).

Everyday incidents of sexism, such as sexist remarks, have been found to negatively affect women’s mental health (Berg, 2006; Hosang & Bhui, 2018). Be that as it may, speaking up against sexism has been found to empower women and have positive consequences when it comes to their well-being (Gervais et al., 2010; Hyers, 2007; Swim & Thomas, 2006). With that in mind, upholding a combative subject position could also be seen as a way for the women who took part in the study to boost and protect their psychological well-being by constructing a positive identity for themselves as empowered “heroines” who speak up, instead of enduring the psychological impact that sexist comments entail. Through their discourse, they choose to raise their voices and defend themselves as well as other women, constructing every sexist comment they hear as a cause for standing their ground.

As was mentioned in the introduction, how a woman chooses to react against spoken sexism varies based on many factors. When it comes to the participants of the present study, it became evident that they shared a certain set of characteristics that possibly played an important role in discursively constructing spoken sexism as a cause for reaction. In detail, the participants were young, working women with a university education. Furthermore, they all had experienced spoken sexism on multiple occasions. Based on their interviews, it appears that the intersection of these identity traits combined with their personal experiences could have led them to decide that enough was enough, showing through their discourse a sense of empowerment, awareness, and a willingness to react in accordance with a more feminist perspective. This combative subject position not only helped empower them but also added to the betterment of their well-being as well as raising awareness regarding spoken sexism.

## **Conclusions**

The present study covered an important gap in the existing literature concerning how women discursively shape their resistance against spoken sexism by constructing it as a cause for reaction. Despite the current backlash on feminism and the risk that it entails, women see it as a moral obligation to act against sexist

comments by discursively constructing them as a call for reaction within a broader feminist ideology. The combative subject position that they adopt is in line with the political aspirations of the feminist movement, which urges women to act against the oppression that they face and fight back. However, the study also revealed that misogyny and patriarchy are still prevalent and that sexist comments are still an integrated part of women's everyday interactions, deepening the structural disadvantage that women face in terms of status and hierarchy. Be that as it may, the participants made it clear in their discourse that they are not about to stand by and watch. Ultimately, the resistance that they shape through constructing spoken sexism as a cause for reaction sends a clear message of opposition.

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## ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

# Ο λόγος της αντίστασης ενάντια στον προφορικό σεξισμό

Αναστασία Φλούλη<sup>1</sup> & Χριστίνα Αθανασιάδου<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Τμήμα Ψυχολογίας, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης, Ελλάδα

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Προφορικός σεξισμός, Μεταστρουκτουραλισμός, Φουκωϊκή ανάλυση λόγου, Φεμινιστικός λόγος	Ο προφορικός σεξισμός, ο οποίος παραμένει μέχρι σήμερα ένα ελάχιστα μελετημένο φαινόμενο, συμβάλλει αδιάκοπα στην διατήρηση της πατριαρχίας, ενώ ταυτόχρονα ενισχύει τον μισογυνισμό και την καταπίεση με βάση το φύλο. Η παρούσα εργασία επικεντρώνεται στον τρόπο με τον οποίο οι γυναίκες κατασκευάζουν ρητορικά τα σεξιστικά σχόλια ως αιτία αντίδρασης, αντλώντας από έναν λόγο αντίστασης και διαμορφώνοντας για τον εαυτό τους μια μαχητική θέση υποκειμένου. Οι 30 γυναίκες που συμμετείχαν στην έρευνα συμμετείχαν εθελοντικά σε ατομικές ημιδομημένες συνεντεύξεις, προκειμένου να μοιραστούν τις απόψεις και τις εμπειρίες τους σε σχέση με τον προφορικό σεξισμό. Για την ανάλυση των δεδομένων, υιοθετήθηκε η επιστημολογική θέση του μεταστρουκτουραλισμού, ενώ για την αποτύπωση των επιμέρους λόγων χρησιμοποιήθηκε η Φουκωϊκή ανάλυση λόγου. Λόγω της έμφυλης φύσης του υπό συζήτηση θέματος και για να αναγνωρισθεί ότι ο προφορικός σεξισμός κατασκευάζεται ρητορικά στο πλαίσιο πατριαρχικών δομών εξουσίας, διατηρήθηκε μια φεμινιστική οπτική σε σχέση με την ερμηνεία και τη συζήτηση των αποτελεσμάτων. Τα ευρήματα αποκαλύπτουν όχι μόνο την ανθεκτική φύση της καταπίεσης με βάση το φύλο, αλλά και την ενίσχυση της συνειδητοποίησης και της ευθύνης όσον αφορά το ζήτημα του προφορικού σεξισμού.
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