

Julia Gillard and the Gender Card and Gender Wars Metaphors

Conceptual Framework: According to Norman Fairclough, one of the leading practitioners of critical discourse analysis (CDA), power relations are exercised and enacted through discourse (text and talk). The goal of CDA is to reveal the ways in which discourses (re)produce and challenge relations of dominance and inequality. Analyzing metaphoric language is useful because metaphors convey meaning succinctly by vividly describing something without literally intending what is said. Metaphors allow us to understand the world in which we live, as these linguistic devices often reflect nascent views held by the dominant culture. When reporters use aggressive metaphors, likening political competitions to battlefields or boxing matches, they reflect and arguably reinforce gendered power relations. Many authors contend that aggressive and war-like metaphors valorize masculinity as dominance and, in turn, perpetuate the dominance of men.

Context: In June 2010, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in a so-called “leadership coup” and replaced by Julia Gillard, who had been serving as Deputy PM. Gillard quickly called an election and while the result was a hung parliament (a tie), her Labor party was able to form a minority government. Throughout her term as PM, Gillard faced what journalist Anne Summers deemed “the political persecution of Australia’s first female Prime Minister” by conservative opposition parties, shock-jocks (talk radio hosts) and virulently negative and even hateful social media campaigns. When the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, tabled a motion in the House of Representatives to remove the Speaker of the House, Peter Slipper, from his position in the wake of revelations about sexist text messages sent by Slipper, Gillard responded by turning the tables on her political opponent. In the speech, Gillard accused Abbott of holding patriarchal attitudes and of making, or supporting, hateful and demeaning about her. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* put it, “Mr. Abbott was excoriated by Ms. Gillard as sexist and misogynist in a speech on Tuesday that made international headlines.” In its coverage of the speech, the Australian press employed two metaphors: the “playing-the-gender-card” metaphor and the “gender war(s)” metaphor.

Method: I searched the database Factiva for news stories published in *The Australian*, *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* containing the words “Gillard” or “Prime Minister (PM)” and “gender card” or “gender wars”. I’ve drawn some sentences from the articles, chosen to illustrate the use of both metaphors. Read each one carefully, noting overt or implicit meanings.

The playing-the-gender-card metaphor

“Julia Gillard has overshadowed her own attempt to fight back against leadership critics by sparking political uproar with a claim that she is treated differently from previous prime ministers because she is a woman. Opposition MPs yesterday attacked Ms. Gillard as a hypocrite who was crying sexism to divert attention from her own incompetence....”If she plays *the gender card*, she is wallowing in self-pity over her own performance (and) that’s what it appeared to me,” Ms Bishop [Deputy Opposition Leader] told *The Australian*.”

“As Families Minister Jenny Macklin said she believed Mr. Abbott was a misogynist, the Opposition Leader accused Labor of overplaying *the gender card*. ‘Alas, we have a government which tends to *play the gender card* to try to deflect what is legitimate criticism,” Mr. Abbott said.”

Monash University Professor Louise Newman “cautions against the word misogyny being flung around too liberally, because ‘depending on people’s views, they can read it as *the gender card* just being played because the PM is a woman.”

“Women in power are rare. We seldom bear witness to them calling out a male adversary for sexism and misogyny because *the gender card* is a dangerous one to play.”

“Ah, *the gender card*. It’s a fully old phrase, isn’t it? You won’t find it in any dictionaries but we all know what it means: a trick women use to get out of detention, by vowing they are being criticized not because they performed poorly, but because their critics are sexist.... What women have understood ‘*gender card*’ slurs to mean is that if they call out sexism, they will be stigmatized as weak, or whingers,

and their careers will be damaged..... Gillard said things women aren't supposed to say, in any job, and most of all, in politics."
Article headline: " <i>Gender card</i> hides failures." "The government's focus this week on playing <i>the gender card</i> is no more than an attempt to divert attention from its policy and personnel failures.... While the sexism circus rolls on, the government's policies threaten the livelihoods of tens of thousands of women around the country."
Article titled "Online sensation exposes Abbott's <i>gender card</i> play to millions" ends with this assertion: "But there is a more serious question for Abbott. The odour of sexism will linger because he has been playing <i>the gender card</i> against Gillard. He drew it from the bottom of the deck, on behalf of the minority of men who may never get used to the idea of a female PM. What he never counted on was Gillard calling his bluff."
"Most women have thought that to play <i>the gender card</i> would count against them. She's accusing her opponent of sexism, which works for her. Without that speech, I don't think gender would be playing out so forcefully," says Baird."
<i>The Gender War(s) Metaphor</i>
"The nation's first female Prime Minister deliberately escalated the so-called <i>gender war</i> in order to defend a discredited speaker."
"The PM may have made a hero of herself to some feminists but she did the wrong thing in trying to protect the sexist Peter Slipper. Now Julia Gillard has <i>the gender war</i> . Or the 'misogyny wars' as the extraordinary, bitter, unedifying class is being dubbed."
"The Gillard government has launched a <i>gender war</i> and Julia Gillard has appointed herself the gender-general and commander-in-chief."
Headline: " <i>Gender wars</i> can't help the Labor cause any more than a quota PM." "Girls, girls, girls. Please put down your gender guns.... At some point, someone courageous within Labor, preferably a courageous woman, should call it. Admit that gender quotas and <i>gender wars</i> have not helped Labor's cause."
"Now it is <i>the gender war</i> . Misogyny is an ugly slur to level at any one. Like the racist charge, there is no acceptable response. To be reduced to declaring 'I am not a misogynist' is to be taken hostage by the smear. <i>The gender war</i> is one of the most demeaning political tactics we have seen, and Australians are likely to see through it."
"Labor Senator David Feeny said 'that conservative political forces were responsible for igniting the heated gender war dominating politics. 'Conservatives cannot complain that there is a misogyny debate going on in public life when they...started it.'"
" <i>The gender wars</i> reached their apex with an outbreak of Mars and Venus on the floor of the House of Representatives. A warring couple (as Gillard and Tony Abbott strangely are sometimes) intent on getting the last word if it bloody well kills them. For the PM, a blow-up of pure frustration; volcanic and howling in intensity because the prelude to the explosion is a long period of not saying. What woman can't relate to that? We've all been there, not saying, broiling about the injustice of not saying."
"Gillard plays Julia, the Feminist Warrior, slaying misogynists whenever they cross her path. Chuffed at the reaction from social media, foreign feminists and left-wing newspapers to her attack on the Opposition Leader in parliament last month, Gillard deliberately has chosen to milk the misogyny card some more. And why wouldn't she? With rising poll numbers, Gillard and her minders must imagine they are on to something with their <i>gender wars</i> ."
"One of the things for which this extraordinary political year will be remembered is the virulent ' <i>gender war</i> '. It is a new phenomenon in federal politics, only partly a function of having a woman prime minister....Gillard [guided by her backroom boys] has increasingly exploited her gender as a political weapon."