

The Dance of Conversation: Gender and Language in Metaphors for West Coast Swing Partnership

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Social partner dance communities have traditionally constrained participation by gender, permitting only men to lead and only women to follow. However, West Coast Swing (WCS), a modern swing dance, is currently in the midst of *degendering* the roles of leader and follower, and the gendered terms traditionally used to refer to them, such that all dancers may participate in their preferred role regardless of their gender. In some ways, degendering is an extension of WCS's relatively egalitarian partnership structure. Unlike in many partner dances, in WCS both the leader and the follower can influence movement choices for the couple. One of the most prevalent metaphors for conveying this conception of partnership is that of a conversation. This metaphor is typically understood as liberatory, suggesting an open exchange of ideas between leader and follower (e.g. Callahan, 2005; Cox, 2012), one that is broadly in line with the egalitarian motives of the degendering movement overall. However, *in practice* the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor often reveals criteria for appropriate "talk" that differ significantly by role and, in doing so, continues to draw on gendered social expectations.

Using Koller's (2004) Critical Cognitive Framework, this project investigates the use of the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor in an episode of *The Naked Truth*, a podcast made by and for the WCS community. The 92 minute episode, "Leading and Following" (2019), presents a discussion of WCS partnership dynamics featuring a male-identifying host who publicly endorses degendering and a female-identifying host who appears ambivalent about the issue. During the episode, the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor is frequently invoked and often co-constructed by the speakers. In the hosts' deployments of the metaphor, the only way leaders were found to be at fault was if they "talked" constantly and never gave the follower room to contribute: "[they] should not be dictating...a hundred percent...of the dance". In contrast, followers' behaviour was much more heavily policed. They were cautioned against "interrupting" or "ignor[ing the leader's] intent" as well as being too much of a "straight follower" (i.e. not offering movement ideas to the partnership), while being encouraged to "support the leader", "pay[] attention and listen[]", and only "contribute" in response to the leader or when the leader offers an opportunity. This dynamic strongly resembles accounts of actual conversations between middle class, white, North American men and women, in which men have been found to hold the floor for a greater percentage of the time and interrupt more, while women talk less, interrupt less, use more supportive strategies (James & Drakich, 1993; Kendall & Tannen, 1997; Lee & McCabe, 2020; Zimmerman & West, 1975) and, despite this, are still often perceived as more interruptive (Orcutt & Mennella, 1995). Though not universally representative of conversation dynamics between men and women, the salience of these same patterns in the way the WCS PARTNERSHIP IS CONVERSATION metaphor is mobilized, reveals underlying heteronormative and essentialized gender ideologies and conceptual models of WCS partnership. These ideologies and conceptions may continue to implicitly tie following to femininity and leading to masculinity, despite the extensive work being done to avoid explicitly gendered language.

This analysis demonstrates the role of shared metaphor use in the persistence of gendered language and ideologies, even amongst speakers and communities that are committed to gender equality and degendering. It further asks: if WCS partnership dynamics give followers more say than other dances, but are nonetheless described through metaphor use that invokes hegemonic masculine conversational norms, can partner dance ever be truly degendered or is the legacy of gendering so pervasive that the mere act of leading or following is inherently situated within hegemonic gender norms?

References

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