

# **Gender in Genre: Female Entrepreneurs' Public Speaking in International Corporate Communication**

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## **Abstract**

*This contribution looks at female entrepreneurs' public speaking in international and cross-cultural business contexts. Our interest in exploring this issue is related to the outcomes of an empirical study we conducted in 2010 in seventeen northern Italian international businesses. Female entrepreneurs' public speaking is worthwhile researching for two reasons. First, from a theoretical perspective, although there is a substantial literature on public speaking (Osborn and Osborn 2006; Grice and Skinner 2007; Zanola 2009, 2010), to our knowledge it mainly refers to rhetoric (Coopman and Lull 2008; Strike 1994; Lucas 1998) and law (Hammond 1993; Nielsen 2004). With regard to the specific field of entrepreneurship, instead, there are only few studies (Cienki, Cornelissen and Clarke 2008; Cornelissen and Clarke 2010) that look at how entrepreneurs speak in public; within those studies the extent to which entrepreneurs' gender has implications on their public speaking has received little attention. Studies that looked at the impact of gender on public speaking relate predominantly to the anthropological field (Johnstone 1995; Natale Riem, Conti Camaiora, Dolce and Mercanti 2010). Second, from an empirical perspective existing studies on public speaking mainly aimed to provide explanations on the nature of public speaking (Esenwein 2009) and on the nature of management gurus (Greatbatch and Clark 2005) in order for practitioners to be more effective orators. Our study seeks to overcome some of those limitations by investigating actors' accounts and the way they construct their discourse. Our study takes a subjectivist, interpretivist perspective. The idea of a public speech that characterizes female entrepreneurs emerged as a striking finding in our data. In this paper we illustrate what our interviewees meant by female entrepreneurs' public speaking, what exactly characterizes this type of speech, in what ways, in what settings and with what purpose.*

**Keywords:** public speaking, business communication, gender studies

## **1. Introduction**

This paper is about the discourse of 'female entrepreneur's public speaking'. Although our research in that context aimed at investigating the strategic implications of female entrepreneurs' decision-making processes on their businesses, the conversations and interviews we had with individuals were characterized by the persistent reference to *female* entrepreneur's public speaking. Wishing to know more about what those individuals meant by female entrepreneurs' public speaking, what exactly characterized this type of speech, in what settings and with what purpose led us to explore this issue in order to seek to understand its importance in the organizational context object of our research. The paper is structured as follows: in the first section we provide an overview of the theoretical background on the characteristics of public speaking and on entrepreneurs' public speaking; following we explain the research context, the philosophical underpinnings of our study, the research approach we took and the research methods we employed for collecting data. We then move on to illustrate our main findings and in the last section we highlight the contributions of our study to existing understandings.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1. Public Speaking**

Although the aim of this paper relates to the implications of the discourse of female entrepreneur's public speaking on female entrepreneurs, it is worth illustrating the background literature on public speaking first.

This literature provides a useful frame for understanding the origins of this subject and the arena in which more specific studies on entrepreneurs' public speaking (which will be treated in the following section) then emerged.

Modern public speaking draws its origins from the British School of elocutionists, among which we underline the importance of Sheridan (1762). He theorized the existence of two types of language, namely the 'language of ideas' and the 'language of emotions'. While the former enables speakers to manifest the thoughts which pass in their minds, the latter enables them to communicate to the audience the effects those thoughts have on their minds. By using those two types of language, in Sheridan's view the office of a public speaker is to instruct, to please and to move. The British School used those principles of elocution in investigative treaties, and for writing manuals for technical elocution (e.g. clerical elocution) and illustrative anthologies. The power of oratory, eloquence and effective speech became central at the beginning of the 20th century thanks to the efforts of the American Elocutionary Movement (Zanola 2002). With the American tradition the relevance of effective speech expanded to the fields of medicine (e.g. lectures) and entertainment (e.g. theatre). Desire for education and the wish to be entertained contributed to the American elocutionists' success. Many people, often trained for professions such as medicine or the theatre, became 'teachers of elocution' in response to a growing demand for training in this field. Though, it was with Dale Carnegie (1913) that oratory and eloquence started to be considered applicable to the business domain from a pragmatic point of view.

Notwithstanding the modern perspective that developed from the 19th century onwards, the basic components of public speaking still preserve elements of the classical tradition elaborated by highly regarded Roman orators such as Cicero and Quintilian. Invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery (Covino and Jolliffe 1995) and the characteristics of correctness, clarity, elegance and accuracy are still considered important canons of modern public speaking. According to a study conducted by Covino and Jolliffe (1995:43), delivery particularly influences the effectiveness of any oral performance because it "refers to the way an orator uses his or her voice and gestures to accompany spoken words". The voice refers to the manner of utterance of the tones in speaking, the modulation of any oral performance, the rise and fall in pitch of the voice. Gestures refer instead to any movement made with a part of our body, especially the hands and head, to express emotion or information, either instead of speaking or while speaking. Harmony between voice and gesture thus becomes relevant for speech delivery. The studies that focused on public speaking both from a rhetorical perspective (Strike 1994; Lucas 1998; Coopman and Lull 2008; Kumar 2005; Esenwein 2009) and from a political and conversation analysis perspective (Atkinson 1984; Hammond 1993; Nielsen 2004) keep in consideration these traditional components.

## 2.2. Female genderisation in the Public Speaking 'genre'

The female voice in public speaking has been common topic for conversation in many blogs and websites in recent years, due to the particular relevance of this subject for the growing number of female entrepreneurs. Nothing scientifically relevant emerges in these sites, apart from general attention given to the description of emotions and fears in women's vs men's approach to public contexts.

In fact, an interesting research trend in the field of language and gender has been developed in the last few decades, focusing exclusively on women as speakers in public domains. Baxter (2006) makes a strong contribution to the study of language in context, in a traditionally feminist interdisciplinary approach. In particular, the theoretical overview by Cameron (Baxter 2006: 3-20) introduces some of the assumptions that have surrounded the public/private dichotomy and, by extension, many discussions of gender. While noting that the dichotomy itself is not necessarily a valid one, she also points out that the types of discourse most valued in a given culture (whether or not considered 'public') are generally more accessible, or even exclusively available, to men. Thus, while the last decade of research on gender and language has illustrated the importance of looking locally, Cameron reminds us not to be blind to the global similarities regarding women's access to privileged speaking practices.

Her contribution also outlines two prominent theoretical approaches to the study of the female voice in public contexts: the first is a framework that Cameron calls *economic*, focusing on women's access (or lack thereof) to the linguistic resources that are most valued in socio-political terms. The second framework, which Cameron describes as *symbolic*, aims to answer a question which the economic approach leaves open: namely, why does gender inequality persist in the domain of public speaking even in those contexts where women have equal access to and competence in valued speaking styles?

This question is addressed in studies which present social psychological and psychoanalytic accounts of women's ostensibly voluntary reluctance to participate in the public sphere. In principle, however, women as public speakers have been studied in the historical context of the United States. In an account of public speaking and gender norms in the nineteenth century, Casey (2000) and Bean (in Baxter 2006: 22-27) describe how early American women speakers made a place for themselves as orators. In particular, they describe the strategies used by these pioneering women to legitimate themselves as speakers, such as the use of religious register, references to female predecessors, and conservative dress.

To sum up, following Litosseliti (Baxter 2006) and Klenke (2011) it seems that women "are faced with having to justify their presence and their achievements" yet are at once "being measured against different norms to men" (Baxter 2006: 45). While the 'female as emotional' stereotype can create power imbalances in discourse, female speakers can also draw on their knowledge of cultural perceptions of women in order to adopt strategies that legitimate themselves as speakers. While these tactics may involve adopting or adapting 'masculine' styles, they may also involve the strategic use of traditionally 'feminine' modes of speech.

### *2.3. Entrepreneurs' Public Speaking*

In spite of the fact that the subject of public speaking has been looked at extensively from a rhetorical point of view as well as from a political/law perspective (cfr. references in the section above), this issue has received limited attention in the organizational context. This section briefly illustrates what existing literature suggests about public speaking particularly with regard to the influence of language on entrepreneurs' talk. It concludes by raising concerns about the developing literature.

Research on management gurus (Greatbatch and Clark 2005) explored the extent to which the methods that underpin the delivery of successful speeches – from an effectiveness point of view – can be transferred from political oratory to the management community. This perspective focused the attention on the extent to which "oratorical skills are universal regardless of the context within which a speech is given" (Greatbatch and Clark 2005:12). The impact of such skills has then been considered with regard to entrepreneurs' institutional legitimacy from a sociolinguistic point of view. In this respect Putnam and Farihurst (2001) argue that entrepreneurs' speech embeds cultural codes that appeal to the public legitimizing their role. Oratorical skills have also been associated with entrepreneurs' success (e.g. recognition of a successful opportunity, successful exploitation of an opportunity). In particular, in their study on the embodied metaphors in the speech and gestures of entrepreneurs, Cienki, Cornelissen and Clarke (2008) argue that entrepreneurs' speech tends to evoke experiences particular to the life and situation of the speaker. This, in turn, makes arguments persuasive to relevant others (e.g. employees, prospective investors). Drawing on those conclusions, Cornelissen and Clarke (2010) also suggest that "individual entrepreneurs use certain forms of speech – specifically, analogy and metaphor – to induce an opportunity for a novel venture" (Cornelissen and Clarke 2010:539) and to establish shared understanding, support and legitimacy. These two authors conceptualize how language and thought interpenetrate in context and how the meaning entrepreneurs want to share is a result of interactions with others.

Although those studies provide useful insights for understanding the role of language in shaping entrepreneurs' ideas and in articulating them to others, little emerges on the extent to which gender has implications on the way entrepreneurs speak and interpret their role. This gap exists in spite of the importance of gender in entrepreneurship (Bruni et al. 2004) and, in particular, of the increasing attention to non-masculine norms of entrepreneurship (Lewis 2006). At this stage, it is important to acknowledge the studies that, from an anthropological perspective, underline the role of gender in public speaking as their contributions can provide an interesting starting point to further investigate this issue. In particular, in exploring the relationship between individual identity and shared sociolinguistic resources, Johnstone (1995) highlights the resistance to gender identification put forward by the women who characterized her sample.

This resistance emerged in spite of the clear influence exerted by gender on the speech of the research subjects. Johnstone (1995) suggests that talking could be gendered notwithstanding the fact that individuals may prefer not to acknowledge this. This contribution as well as the gaps in the existing entrepreneurship literature led us to ask: how can we theoretically account for the implications of the discourse of 'female entrepreneur's public speaking' on female entrepreneurs? To address this question we investigated how actors put forward the discourse of female entrepreneurs' public speaking.

### *2.4. Subgenres in entrepreneurs' public speaking*

Oral communication in public contexts produces a massive quantity of texts at an incredible speedy rate. If we consider only women's relationship, as speakers, to the public sphere in the English-speaking world, our research could be set, following Baxter (2006), in such diverse locales as: academic conferences, the English and Scottish parliaments, the lecture halls, political interviews, courtroom debates and political debates, to quote only the most common ones. As for the contexts for women's public speeches, we could follow Klenke (2011) in choosing among: history, politics, organisations, IT, the media, sports, military, religion, science, higher education, and the arts. The contexts chosen by our interviewees are limited to the organizational domain, and to specific business situations, such as: board meetings, team meetings, meetings with stockholders and Union representatives, informative talks. There is a number of common threads to be found across this complex texture of possible texts and contexts. Many scholars in the field (Culpeper et al. 2009: 499-605, Hall et al. 2011: 89-91, Fairclough 1993, Van Dijk 2011:363) are nowadays united in their view of language as a social practice, emphasizing the performative rather than essentialized nature of gender, the co-construction of social meaning, and the potential for speakers' identities to be fluid, multi-layered, and sometimes even contradictory.

### **3. Research content**

Our empirical study was conducted in 2010 in seventeen Northern Italian SMEs (Mercado, Welford and Prescott 2004) operating in various sectors (cfr. Table I) in Italy. A brief illustration of the research context is in order. First, from a regional point of view, Lombardia is a highly industrialized region often considered one of the four major engines of the European economy, together with Baden-Württemberg in Germany, Catalonia in Spain, and Rhône Alpes in France (Garolfi 1995). The economic sectors of this region are mainly related to farming, heavy and light industry, and services. Small and medium family businesses characterize the industry and operate in the mechanical, electronic, metallurgical, textile, chemical, petrochemical, pharmaceutical, editorial, food and shoe sectors. In the service sector, instead, commerce and finance services prevail (Garolfi 1995). Veneto is also an industrialized region which experienced a significant economic growth from the end of WWII onwards (Coró 1998; Tattara 2001). Small firms are the type of business that prevails in this region particularly in the food, textile, shoe and furniture sectors. Second, in terms of entrepreneurial activity both regions show an increase in the number of small and medium businesses owned and ran by women (Favretto and Sartori 2007).

Our research was carried out within SMEs which operate in the following sectors: automotive, steel, marble, cosmetics, waste recycling, renewable energies, financial/insurance, marketing and communication, services, textile, stationery, jewellery, luxury goods, and food. Thirteen of the SMEs in our sample are based in Lombardia while four are based in Veneto. All of the businesses in our sample export outside Italy. More details on the criteria that guided us for choosing the sample are explained in the methodology section which follows.

### **4. Methodology**

Our study adopts an interpretive and qualitative approach. Careful attention has been given to the uniqueness of the research experience and to the richness of the data that we collected. The inductive approach made it necessary to interpret and analyze new conceptual elements while they were emerging. The empirical research aimed at emphasizing the ways in which individuals interpret their social world (Bryman 2008). The multiple case study design enabled us to investigate our research problem through the use of replication strategy. Drawing on Yin (1994) and Eisenhardt (1989) we explored the extent to which the cases provided similar results for the development of a perspective which could illustrate the phenomenon in question.

We chose a mix of convenience and snowball sampling (Bryman, 2008). The former enabled us to select people on the basis of their availability, while the latter enabled us to make initial contact with a small group of people who were relevant to our research topic and then used this to establish contact with others (Bryman 2008).

We carried out seventeen semi-structured interviews within the seventeen SMEs in our sample, for the duration of no less than one hour each, for a total amount of about thirty hours of recorded data. We interviewed the owners, all women, of every firm without facing any major access issue, apart from needing to reschedule the interview date because of the busy diaries of our interviewees. Interviews were carried out in Italian as this made our interviewees more relaxed. Subsequently, interview extracts were translated into English, reflecting as carefully as possible expressions, words and meanings actors portrayed in their accounts.

We drew on both Halai's (2007) and Hernandez's (2010) contributions to carry out the transcription, translation and transliteration of the interviews in an accurate way. The final translated material resulted into a transmuted text that reflected the original although it had been recreated. Interviewees have been given pseudonyms to ensure

anonymity. The table in Appendix provides details on the age range of our interviewees and on the size, year of foundation, sector and region in which every company operates.

The approach to data analysis draws on the research of Lofland and Lofland (1995) and Bryman (2008) with regard to general coding of our qualitative data. We also followed Ryan and Bernard's (2003) recommendations paying particular attention to repetitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, missing data and theory-related material. This approach provided us with some pointers for organizing our analysis. In terms of the validity and reliability of our study, we refer to LeCompte and Goetz (1982) whose seminal work clarifies the different priorities qualitative researches have compared to quantitative ones in terms of those issues. From the validity perspective, apart from continuously adjusting the constructs while carrying out the study, we aimed to data accuracy by routinely asking for clarification during the interviews themselves. We aimed at focusing on the sense of what each interviewee said. We were particularly alert in asking every time what exactly words used in the workplace everydayness meant to them, also avoiding attributing our own meaning to those words. Moreover, specific feedback sessions were carried out by the research team in order to categorize the data.

## **5. Data**

For understanding the implications of the discourse of female entrepreneur's public speaking on female entrepreneurs, firstly, we looked at what our interviewees meant by this type of speech and in what settings it emerged; secondly, we looked at what exactly characterized it and with what purpose our sample participants used it. Those aspects were widely present in all the accounts we collected. To provide examples of those trends we used our participants' interview extracts. The purpose of this section is to illustrate some of the data we collected. Our conclusions on the data corpus will be highlighted in the discussion section.

### *5.1. What interviewees mean by female entrepreneur's public speaking and settings where this type of speech occurs*

The idea of a public speech that characterizes female entrepreneurs was highlighted by all interviewees (17) and was also a central topic of the informal conversations we had with them after the interviews. Following we highlight some of the quotes in which interviewees specify what they mean by female entrepreneur's public speaking. Enrichetta, the owner of a waste recycling company, explains: "Female entrepreneur's public speaking is simply the way a women entrepreneur, that owns a company, addresses her audience. This audience can be characterized by a group of clients, a group of people that join her same professional association, her employees... it's different from men's way of addressing the public, eh... you can tell".

On a similar note, Paola, who owns a steel company suggests in her own words: "When I talk about female entrepreneur's public speaking I refer to the specific style that is typical of women like me, those who run the company they own. The way we talk when we have to get a message across to our colleagues, employees or clients is distinctive. Our words carry feelings and emotions, showing our attachment to our companies... I'm not saying that male entrepreneurs don't have this attachment, it's just different and the way male and female talk highlights this difference".

Both Enrichetta and Paola identify a difference between the way men and women speak in public. In particular they define female entrepreneur's public speaking as the way women in their position address their audience. The following list of quotes further illustrates our interviewees' interpretations of this issue: "Female entrepreneur's public speaking is one of the outcomes of female language" (Gioia, services sector). "There is a difference between male and female verbal behaviour and female entrepreneur's public speaking is how this difference emerges when an entrepreneur talks in public" (Laura, marble sector). "Female entrepreneur's public speaking is the expression of our identity, as women and professionals, to those with whom we interact inside and outside our companies" (Raffaella, food sector). "Female entrepreneur's public speaking is a style, the style that we use... I mean women in my position" (Silvia, cosmetic sector).

In mentioning identity and style our interviewees hint to female entrepreneur's public speaking as a way to differentiate women from men, not only with regard to verbal behaviour but also from a professional point of view. Once our interviewees specified what they meant by female entrepreneur's public speaking we investigated the settings in which they referred to it. The contexts in which our interviewees mentioned this discourse were: board meetings, team meetings, meetings with stockholders, meetings with employees, meetings with Union representatives, meetings with newly hired employees (concerning their training on the products or services respectively produced and provided by the company), and informative talks (e.g. addressed to university students).

All of our interviewees emphasized the importance of those settings. The quotes below highlight those contexts. This is how Silvia, an entrepreneur operating in the steel sector, illustrates her views:

“It is wrong to think that public speaking occurs only if a person addresses a large audience. In my opinion speaking in public is when I try to get a message across to people in a board meeting, or in a team meeting, or when I communicate with a group of employees or even when I am invited to talk about my company by voluntary associations, for example. All of these settings represent the arena for... eh eh eh... female entrepreneur's public speaking”.

Pia, who owns and runs a textile company, makes a similar point with regard to the size and variety of the audience: “In my experience public speaking happens when I address a limited number of people at one given time and this can occur in meetings with clients, Union representatives, employees, or even a class of university students”.

Instead, this is how Laura talks about it: “Neither the size nor the type of the audience define the situations when we can talk about public speaking... My view is that public speaking occurs when you talk to the stockholders' assembly as well as when you address three employees. In the past, public speaking was associated to politicians or lawyers... emh... I think that that wasn't accurate. Public speaking happens every time that you have a point, a message that you want to get across to a group of people, from three all the way to one thousand, you know what I mean?”

Renata, an entrepreneur in the cosmetics sector mentions the importance of speaking to key people rather than to great numbers. In her words: “You see, I think that a public speech has to be studied, prepared, thought and build *ad hoc*. It has to achieve the company's selling objective, disregarding the number of people that constitute the audience. Even a public speech addressed to two or three key people can have a decisive role in the success pursuit of the company's objective”.

After learning about the presence of the discourse of female entrepreneur's public speaking and the variety of settings in which our sample participants use it, we moved on to explore what, in their views, characterized this type of speech and, to a certain extent, what made it different from the one attributed to male entrepreneurs. In the next section we illustrate some quotes that addressed our interests on those matters.

### 5.2. What characterizes female entrepreneur's public speaking

In our attempt to understand the implications of the discourse of ‘female entrepreneur's public speaking’ on female entrepreneurs, we also focused on what our interviewees thought were the elements characterizing this type of public speaking. First of all the data showed the relevance of the components of public speaking, such as speech construction (opening, body, closing of the speech; working outline, formal outline, key-word outline), delivery (body language; visual aids), and argumentation (informative vs. persuasive speaking; patterns of reasoning; developing evidence and proofs). The importance of those components was underlined by all the interviewees. For example, this is how Gioia, the owner of a financial services company, emphasizes the role of persuasion in argumentation:

“The speech deals with economic and normative issues and audience persuasion is its purpose. In my public speeches I always start from normative texts which represent my point of reference; then I explain and spread those contents to the audience (even to those audiences with no experience in the field). If the audience reacts as I would have wanted, then it means that my speech worked, my argumentation worked. Women know how to be more persuasive... eh eh eh by aiming to the interpersonal aspect, even if at the beginning there is always more suspicion towards the female gender”.

The *delivery* component was considered very relevant by our interviewees. All of them agreed in giving a transitory and temporary role to their background in public speaking; admitting at the same time that, in spite of this, oral communication for their business purposes is permanent or, at least, has a permanent effect on the listener. This is how Anna, an entrepreneur in the automotive sector, frames the component of delivery:

“Delivery is crucial in public speaking. I think of it as a music, a tune. I carry in my mind the music that I want to play and then my voice... the metaphors I use... my gestures... all these things become fundamental. These things enable me to deliver my tune. Delivering a public speech is also about setting the rhythm, the tempo, the pauses, the silences... it's a music. Sometimes I speak on the basis of a music that I have written beforehand, while some other times I just improvise... but even when I improvise, it's always on the basis of the music that I feel inside, that I have in my mind, and that I want the audience to learn”.

As hinted in Anna's quote, *voice and gestures* are a fundamental tool. Interviewees revealed that these aspects are important for fighting against the irreversible time nature of the oral messages. For the Italian business women considered in our study, effectiveness in oral communication in general, and in business communication in particular, might be compromised unless it is combined with variations in the speaker's voice and body movements. This is how Francesca, an entrepreneur operating in the food sector, explains the relevance of voice and gestures in public speaking:

"Speaking in public is like showing to others a path that only I know well. A path of which I know the end, I know where it takes. It's a path on which I have to take the audience... of course the extent to which I deviate from it is related to the type of feeling I create with the public... and I can create the right feeling not only with my message but also with my voice, my gestures. These elements are crucial for getting my point across, for showing the way to my audience, for ensuring the effectiveness of my speech. The right tone of voice, the right gestures... I mean the most appropriate ones for that particular type of message... all of those things impress, stamp the message in people's memory... the audience will remember". In addition to the components of public speech (e.g argumentation, delivery), interviewees highlighted a second set of elements they illustrated as characterizing female entrepreneur's way of addressing an audience, namely: sense of welcoming, emotions and emotion transfer, emphasis on people, spontaneity, self-confidence, and the search for audience's confirmation. According to all interviewees, those aspects define female entrepreneur's public speaking. Following there are some vivid and energetic examples of how our sample participants illustrated their views on this subject. Daniela, who owns and runs a marketing and communication company, argues that:

"Female entrepreneur's public speaking is strongly characterized by a sense of welcoming. When we talk, this sense, this spirit of welcoming reaches our audience... moreover, female entrepreneurs show their concern for people, the importance of people and their contribution to the organization. Male entrepreneurs transmit competition, aggressiveness, and challenge to their audience. I'm not saying that the first alternative is better than the other one... it's just that it's different. The characteristics of female entrepreneur's public speech compliment that of our male colleagues". In this quote Daniela explains the sense of welcoming and the emphasis on people as well as the difference from the aspects that emerge from male entrepreneur's way of speaking. From a similar perspective, Lucia, who works in the financial sector, explains the presence of emotions in public speeches:

"Female entrepreneurs address an audience differently than men do... male entrepreneurs' way of talking, the way they construct their message, the way they support their arguments is based on other aspects emh... more masculine if you know what I mean. Women let their emotions emerge from their speeches. Those emotions don't naturally emerge from a man's speech. When I talk I transfer all the passion I have for my profession and for my business to my public. These emotions enable female entrepreneurs to be impressive. The leverage that male entrepreneurs use to catch their audience are just different. Do we have to conform to those aspects to be effective in getting our message across as entrepreneurs? Says who?"

Gemma, who works in the financial sector, too, illustrates the characteristics of self-confidence and self-esteem; she also hints to the difference from men: "I believe that female entrepreneur's public speaking is characterized by the presence of self-confidence and self-esteem. The background knowledge is important but showing that you are convinced of what you're talking about makes the speech more effective. The audience perceives the content of the message but also, and mostly, the spirit that inspires it". "This spirit reaches the emotional sphere, directly. It involves the listener. Even if listeners disagree with the argument they still perceive how important that is for the speaker and in general how important it is to acknowledge it, to discuss it, to talk about it. This spirit of self-confidence and determination and self-esteem doesn't typically emerge if a male entrepreneur speaks. Men are more controlled, in general... and in this job, in particular. Our way of speaking in public shows that you can 'do' entrepreneurship shifting away from 'macho' approaches that have always been considered 'the' appropriate ones for this job".

With regard to the aspects of spontaneity and constant search for audience's confirmation as well as control, Silvia, an entrepreneur in the steel sector explains:

"I have to say that being a woman entrepreneur today is an incredible advantage. I am sorry for my friends men... eh eh eh... There are two things that generate this advantage. First of all, when a women speaks in public she has spontaneity... male entrepreneurs tend to be obsessed with having everything under control, for example controlling resources, controlling people and this tendency is also reflected in their speeches. I'm not saying that his is bad, it's probably exaggerated... The second element that runs in favour to us is that we always search for audience

confirmation. I adjust my speech according to the reactions of my audience. Men tend to underestimate this aspect, focusing all the attention on their speech”.

A common thread that emerges from the data relates to our sample participants emphasizing the gaps and the differences in the way men in their same roles address an audience.

## **6. Discussion**

Our initial interest in exploring the strategic implications of female entrepreneurs' decision-making processes on their businesses in the Italian regions of Lombardia and Veneto was affected by the widespread presence of the discourse of female entrepreneur's public speaking in our interviewees' accounts. Thus, the empirical study we conducted shifted to enquire what characterized female entrepreneur's public speaking, in what settings interviewees used it and with what purpose they mobilized its related discourse. Our ultimate objective was to investigate the implications of this discourse on our research subjects. Interviewees referred to female entrepreneur's public speaking when addressing the audience in board meetings, team meetings, meetings with stockholders, with employees, with Union representatives, with newly hired employees, and in informative talks. The size of the audience did not emerge as relevant from our participants' point of view.

The traditional components of public speaking, such as speech construction, delivery and argumentation were considered crucial by all interviewees. With regard to those components, interviewees particularly emphasized the role of voice and gestures in getting their message across to the audience. This supports Covino et al.'s (1995) contribution on the role of those two aspects in the delivery of a speech. In terms of the aspects characterizing female entrepreneur's public speech, participants underlined the presence of:

1. a sense of welcoming,
2. emotions and emotion transfer,
3. the emphasis on people,
4. spontaneity,
5. self-confidence,
6. the search for audience's confirmation.

Interviewees highlighted the absence of those aspects in male entrepreneurs' equivalent type of talk. From the analysis of our data we reached the conclusion that research participants mobilized the discourse of female entrepreneur's public speaking to express their identity as female entrepreneurs. Evidence of this is provided by the reference to identity, style, and professionalism (e.g. cfr. Enrichetta, Paola, Laura) and the hints to the fact that some characteristics, in actors' accounts, are typical of women and affect the way they behave (e.g. cfr. Silvia, Gemma, Daniela, Lucia). Our findings acknowledge Johnstone's (1995) work in terms of gender identification in speech.

However, while in her case participants resisted to gender identification, in our case they clearly emphasized the presence of those differences drifting away from what they interpreted as the traditional, masculine way of interpreting entrepreneurship. Cornelissen and Clarke (2010) argue that entrepreneurs use certain forms of speech to establish shared understanding, support and legitimacy. We take forward their contribution by specifying that one of those forms of speech is the identification of a gendered speech that pertains, in this specific case, to female entrepreneur's and that aims to create understanding, support and legitimacy of women's profile as entrepreneurs.

## **7. Research limitations**

The main challenge we faced in carrying out this study is associated with the difficulty of applying findings in this relatively small-scale study to beyond the study's participants. This is a frequently noted limitation of small scale qualitative research (Bryman 2004). Exponents of case study research (Yin 2003) suggest that it is not the purpose of this research design to generalize to other cases or to populations beyond the case (Bryman 2008:57). However, it is suspected that some elements of it are likely to be representative of the experiences of individuals within other SMEs. In particular, it is possible that many of the findings (for example, using the discourse of gendered speaking to subvert and reinscript the dominant views on the idea of 'entrepreneur') are widely applicable to those contexts, but of course only further research could confirm this.

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#### APPENDIX

Table 1 - Sample Information

Interview sequence number	Interviewee's pseudonym	Interviewee's age range	N. of employees	Year of foundation	Sector	Region
1	Anna	59	20	1990	Automotive	Lomb.
2	Daniela	56	30	1989	Marketing and Communication	Lomb.
3	Paola	50	100	1960	Steel	Lomb.
4	Renata	55	50	1969	Cosmetics	Lomb.
5	Silvia	32	200	1950	Steel	Lomb.
6	Arianna	39	20	1774	Luxury goods	Lomb.
7	Enrichetta	45	25	1987	Waste recycling	Lomb.
8	Laura	46	200	1950	Marble	Lomb.
9	Gioia	54	50	1970	Financial Services	Lomb.
10	Lucia	45	20	1989	Financial Services	Lomb.
11	Cecilia	42	30	1990	Clothing	Lomb.
12	Gemma	52	35	1992	Financial Services	Veneto
13	Raffaella	47	40	1985	Food	Veneto
14	Francesca	60	42	1986	Food	Veneto
15	Pia	65	100	1950	Textile	Lomb.
16	Grazia	51	38	1995	Cosmetics	Veneto
17	Chiara	35	12	2001	Food	Lomb.