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## Understanding the formation of linguistic relativity: A Structuralist Analysis of Margret Atwood's Handmaid's Tale

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### Abstract

*The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian fiction which has caught attention of many critics and metafiction readers for its stylistic and thematic approaches. The structuralist theory was morphing into post-structuralist theory at the time the novel came out. Thus, it is necessary to undergo the structuralist and linguistic relative analysis of this metafiction. This research paper attempts to understand the core essence of the predictions and connotations the novel has imbibed in itself. The research essay takes into account the studies that are already done on the novel and compare them to trace down the structuralist concerns that Margaret Atwood raises in her dystopian metafiction. This paper attempts to highlight the linguistic tools that uncover the underlying feminist resistance and rebellion that Atwood portrays in her female characters.*

**Keywords:** Linguistic Relativity, Structuralism, Metafiction, Feminist Resistance

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## Title

# Understanding the formation of linguistic relativity: A Structuralist Analysis of Margret Atwood's Handmaid's Tale

## Abstract

*The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian fiction which has caught attention of many critics and metafiction readers for its stylistic and thematic approaches. The structuralist theory was morphing into post-structuralist theory at the time the novel came out. Thus, it is necessary to undergo the structuralist and linguistic relative analysis of this metafiction. This research paper attempts to understand the core essence of the predictions and connotations the novel has imbibed in itself. The research essay takes into account the studies that are already done on the novel and compare them to trace down the structuralist concerns that Margaret Atwood raises in her dystopian metafiction. This paper attempts to highlight the linguistic tools that uncover the underlying feminist resistance and rebellion that Atwood portrays in her female characters.*

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## Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [Theoretical Framework](#)
- [Research Methodology](#)
- [Analysis](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

**Keywords:** [Linguistic Relativity](#), [Structuralism](#), [Metafiction](#), [Feminist Resistance](#)

## Introduction

A dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985 by a Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. This metafiction highlights the experiences of the protagonist, Offred, a Handmaid in the new society and covers the themes related to religious fundamentalism, totalitarianism and gender oppression. Linguistic relativity is a linguistic theory, also named as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or

Whorfianism which proposes that the structure and vocabulary of a language influence its speakers' worldview and cognition. The theory ranges from strong linguistic determinism to weaker forms of linguistic influence yet stays relevant to understanding how language shapes perception and behavior in the context of both fictional and real worlds. The *Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates how language shapes reality and reinforces power



structures through a structuralist lens. This research paper will examine how both the novel and the linguistic relativity conjoin in order to reflect the narrative technique the novel incorporates to focus on how language constructs and maintains social hierarchies. It will also highlight the relationship between language, thought and power in order to formulate the analysis of how linguistic structures in the novel primarily reinforce ideological systems. The research essay will contribute to the understanding of language as a tool for social control in literature and society attempting to bridge literary analysis with linguistic and sociological theories. It will elaborate the role of language in shaping individual and collective identities and trace the relevance of Atwood's linguistic critique in contemporary discussion of power and communication. This study analyzes *The Handmaid's Tale* using a structuralist framework, emphasizing language structures and how they shape social reality. The approach blends a close reading of significant sections with a comparative examination of language use in various situations and character groupings.

### Literature Review

*The Handmaid's Tale* has been studied under different lenses ever since the novel has been published. Many critics have discussed different thematic and stylistic approaches adopted by Atwood in the said metafiction. Stillman and Johnson in their essay "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*" published in *Utopian Studies* narrate, "Atwood's novel follows a typical dystopian plot: in the face of a powerful regime, the narrator follows the dystopia's norms; then, some possibilities for resistance arise because of cracks in the power structure, a love affair, and the purported existence of an anti-government movement; and escape or change seems possible. The narrative utilizes many fundamental elements common in dystopias. Like *We*, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents totalitarian politics and repressive laws. Like *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Oceania, Gilead is always at war with external enemies (and, according to its evening news, always winning); it faces scarce natural resources; and those who do not fit the society's norms are re-educated, expelled, or executed. Like *Brave New World*, Gilead is a hierarchical society with highly differentiated roles,

status-rankings, and activities (Stillman & Johnson, [1994](#)).

"This story belongs to a distinct feminist tradition which focuses on the representation of women's cultural silence. Not necessarily represented by speculative fictions, this tradition is characterized by an approach to language as an imperfect, oppressive, or superfluous instrument functioning as a barrier to interpersonal communication and exchange, as well as a hindrance to happiness. Contemporary culture is full of images of women experiencing moments of Utopian fulfilment outside verbal language. These are recurrent in filmic narrative and stage performances (e.g. *Nell*, *The Piano*, and *Children of a Lesser God*)" (Cavalcanti, [2000](#)).

Religious connotations and references have also been studied in this novel by the critics. Filipczak offers a new perspective in his essay while talking about the Biblical Intertext in the novel, "Offred is actually coaxed into adopting the role of Eve, who commits the sin that results in banishment. Enticed to cross the boundary between the role of a passive partner in the copulation ceremony and the role of actual mistress in the night-club, she commits a transgression against the sexual dictates in Gilead. The Commander ushers Offred into the forbidden zone of state secrets, which is reflected in the change of their intimate relationship. The outward sign of the change is Commander's gift for Offred, i.e. the nightclub costume. She slips it on, stepping into an unequivocal role. When Serena Joy finds out about this offence, she meets Offred in the doorway as if banning her re-entry into the house, in the usual role which is no longer true. Reproving Offred, she produces the nightclub costume. 'The purple sequins fall, slithering down over the step like snakeskin, glittering in the sunlight'. The tempter, that is The Commander, is absent in the scene of female confrontation. Imprisoned in the ideological paradise from the start and forced to accept its deceit, Offred goes into her room after the encounter with Serena. Shut off from the rest of the world as if in the prison cell, she listens for the rustle of the police van on the gravel, like a sinner who hides herself when the steps of supreme authority start reverberating in the garden. The Cherub with a flaming sword is replaced by spies who literally drive Offred out of paradise, i.e. bring her the freedom which gives rise to the story" (Filipczak, [1993](#)).

## Theoretical Framework

This study of Atwood's fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale*, employs the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as linguistic relativity. This idea was originally introduced by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. It affirms that the language structure shapes or influences how its users perceive and process the world. This study adopts a weaker form by examining how Gilead's linguistic structures shape the identities, actions, and perspectives of its characters, because the stronger version of linguistic determinism claims that language entirely dictates thought. When Whorf's concept of "habitual thought is put under consideration," the analysis exploring how cognitive patterns are shaped by Gileadean language habits is seen (Whorf, 1956). The investigation will also lead to the novel's lexical and grammatical features which is incorporated in later developments in linguistic relativity, such as John Lucy's distinction between semiotic and structural relativity. Moreover, Stephen Levinson's work on spatial cognition informs the analysis of how geographical and temporal language reflects power relations in the narrative. George Lakoff's theories on conceptual metaphors explain how Atwood's language choices shape the story's conceptual frameworks. The aim of this research is to highlight how *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a literary exploration of language's role in shaping a sense of reality albeit creating and limiting it, which indicates a connection between language, thought, and social order. The theoretical framework of the research oozes from structuralism, linguistic relativity, and language-power dynamics. To deconstruct these theories, linguistic relativity helps explain how Gilead's language influences the thoughts and actions of its characters as well as shapes the sense of reality among them.

In an essay titled "*Language, Gender, and Power*", Susan Gal affirms her stance, "it is important to remember that domination and power rarely go uncontested" (Gal 1995).

Theory of Roland Barthes, a prominent structuralist turned post-structuralist, has also been taken into account on codes and myths further illustrate how Gilead's language formulates and maintains social beliefs that water power hierarchies. The tension between Gilead's imposed syntax and the personal expressions of individual

characters is explored through the structuralist concepts of langue (the general structure of language) and parole (individual speech acts). This structuralist approach offers a detailed analysis of Atwood's intentional use of language mirrors that imparts the power dynamics, social hierarchy, and ideological constraints of Gilead. The research elaborates the significant connection between language systems and the social reality they formulate.

Susan Lanser offers a new terminology in her works, "this different approach can be put in terms of 'public' and 'private' levels of narration. 'Public' narration is 'simply narration (implicitly or explicitly) addressed to a narratee who is external (that is, hetero diegetic) to the textual world and who can be equated with a public readership'; 'private' narration, in contrast, is addressed to an explicitly designated narratee who exists only within the textual world" (Lanser 1993).

## Research Methodology

The research methodology inculcated within this paper is used to understand the structuralist approach to analyze the linguistic approach that Atwood has used in the novel. The approach to linguistic relativity is complex in the novel and is intertwined with the integrations of varied theoretical application that provide us with an in-depth textual analysis. The main approach details a methodical analysis of the sort of language used in the novel, with particular emphasis on lexical selections, syntactical constructions, and discursive patterns. As much as this is happening in the novel, we are also provided with a thorough dictionary of Gileadean terminologies and phrases that are arranged according to the social and philosophical roles created for them. Therefore, the study takes on a comparative approach in order to identify linguistic variances and their cognitive implications by comparing and putting the language used by different character groups and in different settings in contrast with one another (e.g., public discourse vs. private thoughts).

## Analysis

In Margaret Atwood's metafiction, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the relationship between language and the social order in Gilead is a key aspect of her dystopian vision. Individual identities are controlled

and erased with names and hence, Shakespeare's famous quote, "What's in a name?" has an answer which draws from linguistic relativity and claims that nomenclature is designed in a way that it becomes the axis of existence of both identity and power dynamics. Handmaids are deprived of their original names and assigned patronymics derived from their male owners (e.g., Offred, Ofglen), labelling them as possession of those owners (Atwood, 1985). This tradition strips them of their personal identity and independence. For instance, social classes are also assigned names according to their designation such as Commander, Marthas etc, which is reflective of their higher status and honor in the social hierarchies. This custom exposes how language is incorporated to classify, control and dehumanize people in social order. As Atwood is very impressive at mirroring the real and fictional world, her Gilead's theocratic government also manipulates its people by using religious terminology and biblical references to justify its social structure. For instance, the use of phrases like "Under His Eye" and "Blessed be the fruit" has been mandatory greetings in Gilead's world, imbibing religious vocabulary into everyday conversation. This subtle linguistic manipulation continually strengthens the regime's power, making it difficult to question or oppose even in casual conversation. Biblical stories are resurfaced and retold to strengthen Gilead's prototypes, especially those that focus more on female subservience and reproductive roles. Through this selective use of religious language, social expectations and norms are subtly shaped. The use of the pragmatic features like politeness and humour that Offred uses steers Gilead's suppressive situation. Offred's language looks into her psychological and emotional strength during the process of suffering (Ashraf et al., 2024). This notion of sex being the divergence point in Gilead is also represented very clear by language. Although men are able to have slightly more varied, grey-area identities in Gilead, the terms often attached to women and particularly Handmaids highlights their centrality in fulfilling biological functions (as "two-legged wombs"). The structure of this phrase enforces the inferior position that women hold in society. Handmaids have a limited vocabulary; they cannot articulate complex thoughts or emotions; this restriction speaks to their further subordination. In contrast, the language of women is about focusing and pleasing as means to

ensure their subordination while that of men asserts power, authority and decision-making among others. Equally crucial in Gilead is the power of euphemism and carefully tailored propaganda to help disguise its violence. For example, "Unwomen" otherizes the resisters and "Ceremony" euphemizes institutional rape. Those word choices are subtle and make it harder to challenge racist practices. "How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood, p. 61). "Offred tries to retain some sense of herself as a distinct individual different from others, but that self-breaks down inexorably, and in the most minute detail. At first she rigorously and confidently refuses to call the room she sleeps in "mine," because it has no key for her to assure her privacy and exclude others and because it is at best a transitory way station for her (Atwood, p. 11). But eventually she labels it "mine" (Atwood, p. 65) precisely when her private life is being compromised" (Stillman & Johnson, 1994).

An overview of history through propagandistic language is an example of how the manipulation of words can reshape collective memory and validate discriminatory frameworks. Some words and phrases in Gilead's language are missing entirely. Fears of individual freedoms, feminist liberation or life before Gilead are scrubbed away. The language has been repressed, and this applied repression creates gaps in the ability of the characters to express resistance or envision it at all. The silence, and in the case of Handmaids where no conversation was allowed between women, is a great example how limiting access to language maintains social hierarchy. The effect of language restriction in Gilead can be observed as one example of Sapir-Whorf. In its most basic form, the dictatorship limits our ideas to those allowed under a highly constraining and Orwellian range of words and definitions. The language barrier directly influences what can be processed through the characters' minds to account for their worldview. Cognitive restrictions arise from lexical prohibitions (example: The Handmaids cannot even conceive of an alternate set of circumstances because there is no language for women's liberty or personal freedom in their world). "Women are in the position of being asked to choose between two things, neither of which is good for them. Why can't they have a third thing that is good for them.... some kind of reasonable social milieu in which porn would not be

much of an issue because it would not be desired by men" (Stillman & Johnson, 1994).

Silence as a tool of resistance in the novel is also studied under the lens offered by Susan Gal. On silence as a form of resistance, Susan Gal questions the idea that the silence of women is a marker of passivity and powerlessness: "Silence ... gains different meanings and has different effects within specific institutional and cultural contexts, and within different linguistic ideologies" (Gal 1995). It is visible in the silences offered by Atwood in *Handmaid's Tale* where the Handmaids are allowed no conversation which means they take it as a tool to resist against upper hierarchal forces when they are forced to speak.

Women characters' dissatisfaction with their status in relation to language is also an important element in the novel. "In an extremist response, one of the Utopian strategies observed in the texts consists in the radical escape from (verbal) language itself, a move which is paradoxically rendered by means of storytelling, i.e., of verbal language. Women's resistance is observed in these fictions in terms of the strategies they develop to evade a dystopic linguistic order by means of the construction of what I have termed utopias of and off language" (Cavalcanti, 1999).

Bakhtin says, "language is a site of struggle". Bakhtin's affirms the constant tussle between the centripetal and centrifugal forces, biased towards unitary language and heteroglossia, respectively (Bakhtin, 1981), offer an interesting parallel to the major linguistic tensions in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The gender-polarized power imbalance is expressed in a meditation by June/Offred that signifies the essence of this linguistic financial overpowering: "He [the Commander] has something we don't have: he has the word. How we squandered it, once" (Atwood, p. 84).

Vocabulary is weaponized in Gilead, and the Handmaids are specially singled out for limited use of language itself. Consequently, minds do not reach beyond the pre-Gilead notions of living, because they have been outlawed. Indeed, this is the linguistic limitation that characters of *Children* employ to express their abstract ideas or emotions; in other words, with a restricted vocabulary comes an inability to convey more complex and deeper thoughts. Thus, Offred's difficulties in expressing her feelings or past memories, for example,

showcases how linguistic restrictions may prevent emotional cognitive processing and recall. It is harder for characters to imagine freedom under new coordinates, because everything in ordinary life conspires against their thinking of the words "freedom" and "choice." "In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood offers to present a civilization in which the language prevails and dominates to lead to the establishment of inflexible communal ideals. Unlike the other characters, however, Offred, the protagonist, is free to deconstruct language since she is not limited to the war for linguistic dominance and has influence over society's reality" (S & Meenakshi, 2022).

The de-politicization of feminist semantics in a gendered environment are the major concerns translated in the linguistic use in the metafiction by Atwood as these concerns have been very prevalent after the feminist lens in the literature was introduced. Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King in their research works related to these ideas focus on the social construction of meaning, specifically the mechanisms of appropriation of feminist semantics and linguistic maneuvering by the (sexist) dominant culture in which the former are re-contextualized: "terms originally with very specific feminist-influenced meanings are subject to redefinition and, not accidentally, are redefined in terms of the perspective of a white male's experience" (Ehrlich, 1994).

Lexical restrictions can impact emotional cognition as seen by the limited emotional lexicon of Gilead's official language. Characters' comprehension of their temporal and spatial reality is impacted by language constraints pertaining to time and space (such as; restricted vocabulary for describing locations, restricted access to calendars, etc.). "Language is so restricted in Gilead that even a simple game of Scrabble is an act of 'voluptuous', thrilling rebellion" EMC. (2021). These coded languages highlight the conflict between enforced linguistic restrictions and people's ability to convey forbidden ideas by showing how people could push the bounds of a small vocabulary. Particularly in formal conversation, the grammatical patterns used in Gileadean language frequently emphasize passive expressions and obfuscate agency. When she meets her shopping-mate and fellow Handmaid Ofglen, Offred is apprehensive, refusing to be drawn into a conversation about the on-going war: Ofglen "may



be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can't take the risk" (Atwood, p. 26). Women's language for describing mobility and location is limited, which is a reflection of the spatial limits put on them, especially on Handmaids. Their sense of imprisonment may be strengthened by this verbal restriction, which may have an impact on their spatial cognition. "By using a patronymic name for each of the handmaids, the regime strips off the women of any remaining trace of self-identity and brands them as the possessions of their Commanders" (Gavrila, 2023). Characters' understanding of time is further impacted by the regime's authority over historical narrative and its ban of certain chronological references (such as historical dates or events), particularly when it comes to their pre-Gilead life. The conceptual metaphor theory developed by George Lakoff sheds light on how Gilead's language choices influence fundamental cognitive processes. This kind of clauses lead us to think and to realize that we are reading Offred's thoughts and so they aren't subordinated (Business, 2024). "But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight" (Atwood, p.18). The widespread application of religious and biological analogies (e.g., women as "fruits," society as a "garden") produces conceptual frameworks that normalize the ideology of the government. These metaphors give characters the mental resources to make sense of their surroundings, so they do more than just describe reality, they actively create it. The characters' assimilation of these metaphors shows how linguistic relativity functions on a more conceptually profound level. Gilead's rigid naming practices and linguistic classifications (Handmaids, Econowives, and Unwomen) serve as an example of how language affects social identity and collective perception. This feature of linguistic relativity influences people's perceptions of others as well as their own selves. It is no accident that earlier critics seem less concerned about the reductive possibilities of visual metaphors. "Verbal hygiene is basic to the use of language in the sense that human beings not only use language, but comment on the language they use, either in order to maintain certain habits or to transform them. It is a general phenomenon in our linguistic behavior, Cameron argues, and ranges from the ordinary practices of everyday interactions to highly institutionalized

forms, with an important critical component in its manifestations: Verbal hygiene comes into being whenever people reflect on language in a critical (in the sense of 'evaluative') way. Verbal hygiene, in turn, offers a more flexible perspective: This impulse takes innumerable forms, not all of which are conservative, authoritarian or (arguably) deplorable" (Cavalcanti, 2000).

This method also draws attention to instances of language difficulty in which Offred struggles to find the right words to convey thoughts or complex emotions that are out of the approved lexicon. This mental fumbling for words highlights how lexical constraints can obstruct thought processes and the expressing of emotions. Atwood frequently depicts this battle by using broken ideas, run-on sentences, or clusters of connected words, simulating the disorganized way that oppressed language leads to cognition. Furthermore, the story told through the stream of consciousness illustrates how Gilead's language gradually penetrates and modifies Offred's cognitive processes. The reader observes her unconscious ingestion of Gileadean expressions in her inner monologues, illustrating the slow assimilation of the regime's language standards. This part of the narrative technique effectively shows how enforced language structures can modify cognitive frames, supporting the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

## Conclusion

Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* allows us to have an extensive understanding and elaboration of the linguistic relativity. The narrative has effectively played on the complex relationship between cognition, language, and social reality. Thereby, *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes how important it is to have a thorough understanding of the ways in which the language shapes public perception and thought in politics, the media, and social institutions. Conclusively, Margaret Atwood's extensive use of language and story in *The metafiction* offers us a significant example of linguistic relativity in operation. The dystopian fiction particularly mentions the critical role that linguistic freedom plays in preserving individual liberty and societal diversity while also maintaining that words have the power to change reality which is done through engaging readers in an environment where language firmly restricts thought and behavior. The novel

provides an engaging case study of how language influences social structures and cognitive processes, and does it well with its ingenious storytelling methods and painstaking creation of the Gileadean language. It can also be observed how Atwood takes on a first-person limited perspective, stream of consciousness, and a fractured narrative framework by simulating linguistic relativity which allows the readers to have a deeper understanding of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, done by directly experiencing the comprehensive restrictions put forward by a restricted language. The novel further highlights how effective language manipulation can be as a tool for social control. Gilead's reign successfully forms the ideas and perceptions of its citizens by restricting terminology, redefining phrases, and imposing specific linguistic patterns, which goes on to show the pragmatic relevance of linguistic relativity in the power structures. The story

elaborates the reservations forced by linguistic limitations as well as the potential for cognitive resistance in humans through Offred's internal battles and moments of linguistic innovation. The complex interactions that already exist in the individual cognitive processes and linguistic conventions in the literary trends can also be seen incorporated by Atwood in her metafiction novel. The customs regarding nomenclature in Gilead as well as the limitations in self-expression impart how language affects the identity formation and development of self-perception. It also imparts how linguistic relativity can impact both the cognition and the fundamentals of personality in an individual. Atwood significantly offers her readers to formulate a metalinguistic understanding within the underlying fallibility of history and metafiction which forces us to ponder upon the fact how language affects our perception of reality.

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