

# Gender Models in Swedish Proverbs

## *A Cognitive Approach*

The construction of gender identity is a complex and much debated area of research. As postmodern researchers (see for example Butler 1990) have shown, gender could be described as something performed, rather than an inherent stable property of the self. Individual gender performances are, however, highly dependent upon existing structures, mainly manifested in language (see for example Butler 1999). Philosopher Seyla Benhabib describes these existing patterns as established narratives which limit the way in which we can construct ourselves and describes the process of identity formation as the following:

To be and to become a self is to insert oneself into webs of interlocution; it is to know how to answer when one is addressed; in turn, it is learning how to address others (Benhabib 2002:146)

In this paper, such preexisting structures are discussed, using the concept of metaphor, as defined by for example George Lakoff 1987 as well as the concept of cultural models as defined by Holland & Quinn:

*Cultural models* are presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared [...] by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it (Holland & Quinn 1987:4)

The relationship between and potentially overlapping of the concepts cultural models and metaphor will be discussed (see Kövecses 1997, Gibbs 1997, Cienki 1997).

The empirical material consists of approximately 120 proverbs, collected in northern Sweden.

One such cultural model that is found in the material is *The Heteronormative Market*. This is a model of how women and men meet and become couples, that draws upon a highly salient market-metaphor: TO MEET A PARTNER IS TO PURCHASE GOODS. The analysis reveals that the person doing the purchase is a man, and, subsequently, the female is construed as the item purchased. There are several nesting models within *The Heteronormative Market*, where a hierarchical model of positively valued female properties which enhance the women's market value, is one. One important result of the analysis is a cultural model describing the room to manoeuvre given to women and men acting on *The Heteronormative Market*.

Several key proverbs will be analysed in the paper, for example: *To propose is like exchanging horses, you have to pay attention* where the market-metaphor is explicitly evoked and *The one that proposes in the dark, have to take her as he gets her* which shows a focus on the "buyer" and his obligation to examine the purchased item.

The results of the study consists of a descriptive account of cultural models and cognitive metaphors found in the proverb material. These structures are then used in a discussion of how gender identity could be performed within a cultural context, and how language in general and proverbs in particular – by reinforcing cultural models and metaphors - determine and limit these performances.

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