Gender Representation and Role Reversal in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House

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This paper investigates the functional use of language to highlight gender specific traits and power asymmetry patterns in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. It applies Structural Functional model to the text, a model which is a critical synthesis of Speech Act Theory, Conversational Analysis and Functional Linguistics. It studies and unfolds recurring patterns of dominance of Helmer and Nora by tracing acts, moves, exchanges and transactions in their conversation. The results obtained from the analysis are enlightening as there is a role reversal in the play and the acts, moves and exchanges which are quite peculiar to Helmer (in Event 1) are taken over by Nora towards the end of the play to liberate herself from moral subjugation and social oppression (Event 2). The study shows that Nora’s sex remains the same, but her gender changes towards the end of the play when she slams the door. The present study is a contribution in the field of Language and Gender which began with the frameworks of deficient to dominance and difference. But the study tends to move away from an Essentialist (deficient) framework to Constructionist one, that is, gender is not a fixed entity, but a fluid social construct residing in interaction. As a result, the study reinforces Butler’s concept of gender as performative. The study shows that gender is a process which is neither ready made nor complete or consummate and we are not automata destined to perform the sex roles assigned at birth. But we can defy the unjust social order by constructing and defining our own gender. Thus, the study has a liberating tendency as it helps to identify hierarchical and vertical relationships.

Keywords: feminist linguistic analysis, structural functional approach, gender representation.