**Part I: Preliminary Information**

**Title:** “Speak I Must!”: Historicizing a Feminist Linguistic Approach to the Bronte Novels

**Names:** Meara Waxman (Mentor: Dr. Janet Myers)

**Abstract:**

This project aims to detect common linguistic patterns used by Victorian feminists across different types of discourses to gain insight into feminist rhetoric in novels by the Bronte sisters. It is important to study language in its historical and cultural context, so this project will compare novels by Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Bronte to the publications of three well-known female activists (Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe, and Caroline Norton). The purpose of this inquiry is to find out whether Victorian women writers used consistent linguistic structures and, if so, to ask why those structures are significant in the context of female societal expectations in nineteenth-century novels. These questions relate to ongoing debates in the relatively new field of feminist linguistics about how language can encode gender discrimination and whether or not women use a “female sentence” to communicate differently than men.

**Personal Statement:**

Nearly tripping over my costume, I clutched a hand-painted suffragette sign. It was my high school’s prohibition party, an event that culminated our study of the 1920s. I portrayed Alice Paul, a woman who spearheaded the feminist movement and pioneered the Equal Rights Amendment. While studying her life, I realized that her influence on society was rooted in language. Paul stood on the streets and held signs that directly called out President Wilson as the perpetrator of women’s oppression. The wording of her Equal Rights Amendment placed men and women on equal ground, and it used active voice instead of passive voice when it stated that “men and women shall have equal rights.” Although a passive construction was more common for women as a sign of submission, Paul actively asserted the female voice to express her rights. Paul’s hardships made me realize the degree to which language reflects and perpetuates the patriarchal structure of society. Her determination to push the boundaries of language inspired me to be active not only in my language choices, but also in my intellectual pursuits. For example, I frequently conduct research when I find unfamiliar terms, even if I am only reading for pleasure.

Due to my interest in Paul and my eternal love for reading, I began to search for feminist themes in literature and realized that Alice Paul was not the only woman to revolutionize feminist language. From Virginia Woolf to Zora Neale Hurston, the examples are endless, but my favorite is J.K. Rowling. From her name, readers cannot even discern her gender, but Rowling incorporates female agency in the *Harry Potter* series through the brilliant sidekick, Hermione. Rowling’s novels offer a modern outlook on how literature can challenge patriarchal social norms. After examining feminism in several literary periods, I eventually developed an interest in Victorian women writers because they commandeered a field that men had previously dominated.

Once my high school teacher exposed me to sentence diagramming, a breakdown of a sentence’s composition and parts of speech, I found a way to deepen the connections between gender, literature and language. Sentence diagramming combines the analytical thinking usually associated with English class and the exact calculations more often used in mathematics. Just as we need the unwavering law of gravity to understand the existence of planet Earth, we also need syntactical rules to communicate through language. The structure of each sentence, from the word choice to the type of verb, can offer insight into the speaker’s personality, values, and goals. By examining the linguistic structures of a text, I can understand the underlying societal tensions and synthesize my passions for language, literature, and gender studies.

Since I aspire to teach high school and college English, I intend to show my students not only how society shapes language, but also how language shapes society. Language is the basis of our interactions, and it is constantly evolving. Just as Alice Paul, following the path of nineteenth-century women writers, used active voice in her Equal Rights Amendment to challenge oppressive cultural expectations, activists today employ pronouns, such as the singular “they,” as a symbol that gender constructions are increasingly fluid. Language is dynamic; it continues to develop and shape society, and I hope to track its progress by studying how authors use language in their literature. As I complete my undergraduate studies and pursue a graduate degree in English, I want to share my enthusiasm and curiosity with other scholars; therefore, I hope that this research will help me extend my passion beyond excitement and into the realm of academic discovery.

**Part II: Project Description**

**Focus:**

This project aims to detect common linguistic patterns used by Victorian feminists across various discourses to understand feminist rhetoric in novels by the Bronte sisters. I will compare Victorian feminists’ publications to Bronte novels to answer the following questions: Do the Brontes borrow from linguistic patterns used by female activists in order to negotiate or challenge expectations for women in society? If similarities exist, do they denote elements that constitute a “female sentence?” If they do not exist, what do the differences between discourses suggest about the Brontes’ feminist inclinations and aspirations as novelists?

Bronte Criticism

This research will focus on four novels that feature female heroines who challenge cultural expectations: *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* by Charlotte Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, and *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Bronte. The Brontes offer unusual insight because their father valued education and encouraged creative expression (Lamonica 39). Consequently, the sisters developed new ideas about how society should function and highlighted those opinions in their novels. They also used pseudonyms, which accentuates the lack of opportunity afforded to women writers. The Brontes combined “individual and family needs with broader factors involving social commitments,” thus suggesting that women should participate fully in society (Knapp 184).

Numerous scholars have examined Bronte novels from a feminist perspective, starting with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s groundbreaking work on metaphors of entrapment. Recent researchers have supplemented their analysis, from Jamie Crouse, who cites the lack of setting variety in *Wuthering Heights*, to Sibylle Drack, who accentuates the discrepancy between what women are capable of doing and what society allows them to do (Crouse 179 and Drack 88). Drew Lamonica extends these ideas by studying “female enclosure and entrapment within domestic spaces” in Bronte novels (3). In *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, for instance, the protagonist challenges the separate spheres ideology, which dictates that women must remain in the home, by requesting a divorce (Cornell 11). Additionally, Susan Fraiman emphasizes how class differences complicate women’s feminist alliances (90). Feminist critics consider how novelists’ decisions are influenced by gender not only to suggest that culture influences literature, but also to indicate that literature affects culture.

Feminist Linguistics

Linguistics, the other component of my analytic lens, is an interdisciplinary field that incorporates anthropology and psychology as well as language studies. This discipline is relatively new because women only joined linguistic fields in the last fifty years (Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language* 2). Feminist linguistics combines inquiries of language with questions about gender by identifying cultural factors that determine how women communicate. Prominent debates center on the existence of the “female sentence,” which states that women’s discourse differs from men’s. Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray begin the discussion with their psychoanalytic approach, claiming that gender expectations are embedded in childhood language development (Mills, *Gender Matters* 18). While Lacan defines the “female sentence,” Irigaray explains that women use it because of biological differences (Mills, *Gender Matters* 21). Robin Lakoff and Dale Spender assert that women speak differently than men, so scholars should analyze their writing separately (Mills, *Feminist Stylistics* 45). Deborah Cameron and Jennifer Coates’ sociolinguistic approach, which centers on female speech patterns in social environments, adds that women writers are constrained by male-dominated language (Mills, *Feminist Stylistics* 46). However, there is no confirmation that the “female sentence” exists, so these scholars attempt to answer the fundamental question: do women and men communicate differently?

Several researchers have applied feminist linguistics to individual Bronte novels (Wittenberg). Suzanne Shumway unearths the “female element of narrative” by analyzing how male-dominated dialogue oppresses females in *Jane Eyre* (152). Sibylle Drack studies how dialogue critiques female social expectations, and Naomi Jacobs analyzes narrative techniques (Drack 89 and Jacobs 204). Susan Smith extends Drack’s work by explaining that female characters in *Shirley* switch dialects to give themselves an advantage in various social environments (638). Finally, Carol Senf suggests that patriarchal language prevents women from dictating their own narratives (448).

I will extend this criticism by contextualizing the Brontes’ language structures within their historical framework. As Mills explains, “language… presents certain choices within a set of restricted [historical] parameters” (Mills, *Feminist Stylistics* 12). I will examine those parameters by comparing the Brontes’ linguistic structures to writings of contemporary female activists. This research considers the Bronte works together, whereas previous scholars only compared one or two texts. Additionally, my interdisciplinary approach connects to ongoing debates about gender and language. By analyzing nineteenth-century women’s writing structures across genres, I may discover linguistic elements that relate to the “female sentence” or social pressures that are manifested in language. This analysis is important because gender discrimination constantly occurs at the level of language, and we need to recognize that bias to combat it in the future.

Female Activists

I chose three prominent nineteenth-century feminist activists to compare to the Brontes. Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) achieved fame through her political reform concerning women’s education, employment, and the domestic sphere (Postlethwaite). Her writings informed Victorian culture and challenged patriarchal society. Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904) reformed divorce laws, especially advocating for working-class women who could not afford lawyers (Hamilton 454). Lastly, Caroline Norton (1808-1877) wrote bills that promoted women’s property and custody rights, as indicated in the Matrimonial Clauses Act (Poovey 467). By comparing these activists’ writings to Bronte discourses, I may discover patterns that inspired feminist reform.

**Scholarly Process:**

Feminist linguistics, my methodological framework, will help me focus on language structures that may be similar despite the differing genre requirements of speeches and policies versus novels. First, I will analyze the activists’ writings, seeking common linguistic patterns among the three feminists. Next, I will search for similar strategies in the Bronte novels. My analysis will emphasize four linguistic categories: syntax, to determine if the writers use active or passive voice and direct or circuitous passages; dialogics (the study of dialogue), to examine characters’ speech patterns; diction, to determine whether the authors prefer formal language or vernacular; and tone, which might disclose women’s submissive or insubordinate responses to male authority. These comparisons may uncover linguistic structures that Victorian women writers used to encourage reform, or they may reveal that novelists’ strategies are unique to their genre. Either way, this project will increase research on whether or not certain patterns denote a “female sentence.”

To complete this project, I need expertise in three areas: linguistics, Victorian feminist history, and Bronte literature and criticism. I am currently enrolled in Linguistics (ENG301), where I am developing a research paper on dialogue in *Shirley* and learning to analyze Bronte texts linguistically. In spring 2018, I hope to study in Bath, England through Advanced Studies in England (ASE), which will include a one-to-one tutorial at Oxford University with a feminist linguistics expert, such as Deborah Cameron.

To gain a foundation in Victorian feminist history, I will complete an interdisciplinary SURE project this summer with Dr. Michael Carignan, which I will expand on in England. During SURE, I will study the three activists’ writings to understand the connection between gender and culture and the influence of linguistic patterns. At ASE, I will continue that work by conducting archival research on feminist discourses at the Women’s Library in London. Additionally, I hope to take advantage of ASE’s Victorian social history course.

I will familiarize myself with Bronte literature and criticism through the British Women Writers Association (BWWA), coursework, and the Bronte museum. By attending BWWA conferences, I can discuss my findings with Bronte scholars. Additionally, I will take courses at ASE or Elon on Jane Austen, the Brontes, and feminist approaches to literature. While in England, I will travel to the Haworth Parsonage Museum, where the Brontes lived and drew inspiration for their novels. The museum offers manuscripts, letter archives, and information on the sisters’ personal lives, which will help me theorize how external factors affected the sisters’ writing styles.

While completing my project, I will engage in a Teaching Apprenticeship (ENG489) for a Bronte author studies course with Dr. Myers. To prepare, we will create a syllabus during SURE 2018. This opportunity will allow me to share my research findings and utilize my skills as a Writing Center tutor. By preparing lessons, I will gain invaluable experience as I apply for graduate school and teaching positions. I specifically hope to create lessons on *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre* because I will likely teach those texts in the classroom.

**Proposed products:**

The project will culminate in a multi-chapter thesis with sections on each Bronte sister. I also plan to submit papers to four conferences: the 2018 British Conference of Undergraduate Research to discuss my SURE 2017 findings while studying abroad, the BWWA conference, SURF, and NCUR. Finally, I plan to submit articles to the peer-reviewed journal *Bronte Studies,* the only professional periodical solely dedicated to Bronte research, and the *Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*. After serving as a Teaching Assistant, I will also have teaching materials to use for future classroom enhancement.

**Part III: Feasibility**

**Feasibility Statement:**

In addition to obtaining hard copies of each Bronte novel, I will also purchase books on linguistic theory, Victorian historical background, and biographies on the Brontes and activists. Almost all of these resources are available through Amazon or similar venues; the few books that are not included within those databases are accessible through independent publishers. Additionally, while I have not yet received confirmation that I have been accepted to the Advanced Studies in England program, I have obtained assurance that ASE will offer my desired classes during the spring of 2018 and that my proposed independent tutorial is feasible. Lastly, Dr. Janet Myers is a suitable choice to oversee this project because of her expertise in both Victorian literature and feminist literary theory. Her experience in analyzing nineteenth-century literature from a feminist perspective will be invaluable as I learn how to employ a similar critical theory. While Dr. Myers does not have a background in linguistic analysis, the linguistics course at Elon and the independent tutorial at ASE will provide the necessary professional foundation and guidance in that interdisciplinary field.

**Budget:**

* **Books: $600**
  + Hard copies of each Bronte novel: $50
  + Books on linguistic theory, Victorian feminist history and Bronte history: $500
  + Photocopying of useful chapters: $50
* **Membership to the Bronte Society: $15**
  + This lifetime membership will provide access to the Bronte Society publication and inform me about upcoming events
* **British Women Writers Association annual conference (June 22-24, 2017): $300**
  + Registration fee: $75
  + Travel: commute to Chapel Hill and parking for three days: $150
  + Meals: $75
* **British Women Writers Association annual conference (June 2018): $1,075**
  + Registration fee: $75
  + Travel: $500
  + Accommodations and meals: $500
* **British Conference of Undergraduate Research (Spring 2018): $590**
  + Registration: $90
  + Cab from train station to hotel and back: $100
  + Accommodations and meals: $400
* **SURF poster: $30**
* **National Conference of Undergraduate Research deposit: $100**
* **Study Abroad with ASE in Bath, England: $4,650**
  + Travel: $1,950
    - Round trip plane ticket: $1,300
    - Britrail pass to travel to research sites in England: $650
  + Tuition: $1,150
    - Independent tutorial fee: $1,000
    - Books for classes on British women writers and Victorian history: $150
  + Trip to London for archival research in Women’s Library: $500
    - Cab fare from train station and back: $100
    - Accommodations and meals: $400
  + Weekend trip to Bronte Monuments in York: $1,050
    - Cab fares from train station and back: $100
    - Accommodations and meals: $400
    - Haworth Parsonage specialized tour: $100
    - Personalized Bronte day tour in York: $450
* **Total: $7,360**
* **Tuition: $7,640**
* **Grand total: $15,000**

**Timeline:**

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|  | **Proposed Experiences** | **Proposed Products** |
| **Summer 2017** | * Attend the British Women Writers Association annual conference (June 22-24, 2017) * SURE 2017 with Dr. Mike Carignan to acquire a foundation in Victorian feminist history | * SURE 2017 historical research paper and poster |
| **Fall 2017** | * Take two HNR498 hours * Take ENG333 Women in Literature: Feminist Approaches (if offered) * Take ENG346 Bronte Author Studies course (schedule permitting) | * Honors thesis proposal * BCUR abstract (adapted from SURE 2017) * Draft of analysis on *Jane Eyre* |
| **Winter 2018** | * Take two HNR498 hours | * Draft of analysis on *Shirley* |
| **Spring 2018** | * Study abroad in Bath, England * Conduct an independent study on feminist linguistics at Oxford University * Conduct archival research at Women’s Library in London * Take courses on social history of the Victorian Era and Jane Austen at ASE * Travel to Bronte Parsonage Museum and other landmarks * Attend BCUR | * Conference paper for British Women Writers Association * Complete linguistic methodology with the help of the Oxford tutorial |
| **Summer 2018** | * SURE 2018 with Dr. Janet Myers (pending acceptance) * Attend and present at the British Women Writers Association annual conference (pending acceptance) | * Draft syllabus for Bronte course * Draft of analysis on *Wuthering Heights* |
| **Fall 2019** | * Take two HNR498 hours * ENG495 Senior Seminar | * Draft of analysis on *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* * Completed NCUR application |
| **Winter 2019** | * Begin revising chapters | * Completed analysis of all four Bronte novels |
| **Spring 2019** | * ENG489 Teaching and Learning Apprenticeship for Bronte author studies course * Thesis defense * Two HNR498 hours to revise chapters * SURF Presentation * NCUR Presentation | * Revised thesis * Completed lesson plans for Bronte author studies course * SURF Poster * Completed article to submit to *Bronte Studies* journal and the *Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English* |

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