

# **FIGHTING WORDS:**

## **Representations of dominant masculinity in the interviews of a mixed martial arts champion**

Bachelor's thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Vapaaottelun kasvattaessa suosiotaan kansainvälisesti tunnettuna urheilulajina ovat myös lukuisat vapaaottelijat yhä laajenevan mediahuomion alaisina sekä lisääntyvän julkisen vaikutusvallan käyttäjinä. Näin ollen useille vapaaottelijoille vaikuttaa olevan yhä tärkeämpää esiintyä julkisesti siten, että heidän käytöksensä houkuttelisi mahdollisimman paljon maksavia asiakkaita katsomaan heidän otteluitaan sekä itse ottelutapahtumiin että maksullisten TV- ja internet-palveluiden välityksellä. Tyypillisesti tällainen käytös sisältää oman itsen julkituomista mahdollisimman maskuliinisesti ja itsevarmasti sekä kilpakumppanien esittämistä muun muassa fyysisesti ja urheilullisilta kyvyiltään alempiarvoisina. Tämän ilmiön keskiössä voidaan nähdä olevan kieli, jonka avulla ottelijat rakentavat itselleen julkisia identiteettejä sekä myös määräävät niitä muille.</p> <p>Diskurssianalyysin keinoja ja maskuliinisuusteorioita hyödyntäen tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää, miten edellä kuvatun kaltaiset dominoivan maskuliinisen identiteetin rakentamisprosessit ilmenevät irlantilaisen vapaaottelijan Conor McGregorin kielenkäytössä. Tätä tarkoitusta varten valittiin viisi McGregorin kirjoitettua haastattelua, joissa esiintyvää kieltä analysoitiin dominoivan maskuliinisuuden avainkonseptien osalta diskurssianalyttisesti. Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että McGregor hyödyntää ilmeisen vaivattomasti omaksi edukseen dominoivan maskuliinisuuden ihanteeseen läheisesti liitettäviä konsepteja, kuten aggressiivisuutta ja materiaalisen vaurauden korostamista. Tämä ilmeni merkittävinä sanavalintoina, vertauskuvina ja toistona. Lisäksi McGregorin kielenkäytössä esiintyi kilpakumppanien esittämistä feminiinisinä, mikä osaltaan korosti McGregorin omaa maskuliinista julkisuuskuvaa entisestään. Tulosten voidaan nähdä viittaavan siihen, että julkisesti vaikutusvaltaisten vapaaottelijoiden kielenkäytössä esiintyy dominoivaa maskuliinisuutta ihannoivaa sisältöä, jolla saattaa olla mahdollisesti laajoja ja merkittäviäkin vaikutuksia yksilöiden ja yhteisöjen arvomaailmoille sekä maskuliinisuuteen ja mieskuvaan liittyvälle arvokehitykselle.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Mixed martial arts (MMA), one of the fastest growing sports in the world, is a form of unarmed hand-to-hand combat. It involves two willing participants, who are allowed to strike each other with virtually every limb, wrestle, and force submissions via an array of chokeholds, joint locks, and other similar maneuvers (UFC 2016). As the sport has gained great popularity in recent years, so have its athletes – the fighters. With this increased visibility in the mainstream media, it seems that it has now become more important than ever for several fighters to market themselves in a way which makes them attractive to the paying customer, i.e. the viewer, who pays to watch them fight on TV, online, or live at the venue.

In order to appeal to the viewers, and sponsors, too, it appears that many fighters opt to present themselves as self-confident and masculine as possible. This public persona often involves making one's opponent seem inferior in terms of, for example, skill, physical attributes, and previous athletic accomplishments compared to themselves. For many fighters in the lead-up to a fight, this type of confrontational expression works to build their own self-confidence, while hopefully deteriorating their opponent's at the same time. Moreover, it makes the fight seem more interesting to the public because of the added drama and animosity this kind of behavior creates between two fighters. However, although language use, and arguably masculine discourse, too, are at the center of this phenomenon, little research has been done on it in the field of linguistics applying masculinity theories in the context of mixed martial arts. Even though, for instance, Channon and Matthews (2015) and Holthuysen (2012) do employ methods derived from linguistics in their studies on masculinity and male homosexuality in MMA and masculinity and masculine hegemony in MMA, respectively, their foci and data are quite different compared to the present study.

As an avid follower of mixed martial arts myself, I am especially interested in studying how the prominent role of masculinity in the speech of aggressively self-promoting fighters is constructed and achieved through language. In addition, because of the ever-growing popularity of mixed martial arts, there may be implications for a wider social impact. As the masculine language use described above receives increasing visibility, it is probable that the values and behavior of the general public regarding masculinity and the representation of self and others are affected (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 846). Therefore, it is important to study how this type of masculinity can be constructed and made visible in language use. For the purpose of discovering this, in my research, I study the written interviews of an Irish mixed martial arts champion called Conor McGregor, who is known for his brash, even arrogant, statements when promoting his fights.

## 2 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

In this section, discourse analysis is presented as one of the essential theories supporting the present study. Firstly, the general concept of 'discourse' is defined briefly before continuing with the question of exactly how and what to analyze when doing discourse analysis. Lastly, some common uses and aims of DA are discussed in order to demonstrate its value for the present study and the field of linguistics as a whole. As a disclaimer, it perhaps bears mentioning that this chapter is merely intended to be a very brief and concise introduction to the vast and varied field of discourse analysis with a substantial focus on aspects relevant to the thesis at hand.

### 2.1 What is discourse?

Johnstone (2002: 2-3) defines discourse in a very concise manner as consisting of real occurrences of communication. This definition, therefore, practically eliminates the focus on language as an abstract system from the realm of discourse analysis. Instead of studying language in isolation separate from its users, discourse analysts are more interested in the effects of people using what they know about language, not just to say things, but also to *do* things with language. The analysts hence attempt to discover how people use their language knowledge to create something, convey emotions, make people laugh or cry, or perhaps to provoke listeners and reassert their own status (as can be argued is the case with quite a few excerpts of discourse analyzed in the present study), and so on. This knowledge Johnstone (2002: 2-3) calls a “set of generalizations” and it can be seen as rules derived from that abstract system which tells us what words typically mean, in what communicative context or order in a sentence to use them, etc. Discourse is the place of origin for this knowledge, but also the result of applying it. After all, what people perceive as being typical for language is based on the type of discourse they engage in. Also, by implementing aspects already known, they are able to construct and understand completely new discourse.

Furthermore, Gee (2010: 2) adds that not only do we say things and do things with language, we also *are* something because of it. By choosing to employ certain word choices, tones, dialects, etc., we are able to assume different social identities at different times and places. For example, a hip hop artist having a conversation with his friends backstage at a concert is sure to use language quite differently compared to when he is visiting his grandmother. Therefore, language allows us to put forward different aspects of ourselves depending on our surroundings and the people we are in communication with. Moreover, this identity building property of language use is central to the analysis in the present study as an attempt is made to describe how Conor McGregor utilizes

masculine language in order to construct a certain public identity (or identities). Gee (2010: 2) also points out that the aspect of being (taking on identities) via language is closely connected to the previously discussed informative (saying) and active (doing) functions of language use. Indeed, it would be impossible to fully understand something a person says without knowing who that person is and what they are attempting to do by saying it. In sum, as Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (2004: 4) describe it, to speak of discourse is to speak of everything there is to communication (either spoken or written) that lies “beyond the sentence” i.e. in the situated (contextual) use of language. Thus, the very act of using language is performing discourse.

## 2.2 ...and how to analyze it?

In their description of discourse, Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (2004: 3) also highlight the role of text. In fact, they assert that the whole notion of *discourse* is synonymous with the use of texts in their contexts. However, the definition of text in the field of discourse analysis contains more than merely the concrete manifestation of letters and words on, for example, paper or a computer screen. It also includes the semiotic feature embedded in that particular instance of communication (i.e. sounds coupled with meanings), the linguistic choices made, and finally, how those choices are assembled into meaningful sequences. Thus, it is important to note that text is not just the concrete result of discourse, i.e., for example, these words on this page, but also the very medium through which discourse happens. Most importantly, it is communication in the format of text, whether written communication or transcribed speech, which is taken as the basic unit of discourse analysis in this approach dubbed “the text-linguistic perspective to discourse” by Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (2004: 5).

This type of linguistic analysis, as Johnstone (2002: 4) suggests, can be understood as “a process of taking apart”, where longer parts of discourse are often split into smaller bits on the basis of differing criteria and then analyzed one by one with certain characteristics in mind. The division can be done quite literally, for example, by dividing the text into singular words, phrases, and their concordances in order to say something about what meanings are invoked using those words. However, it can also be done more figuratively. One way of doing that could be dividing it into different functions in order to describe, for example, what intimidating or discouraging discourses are like. In the present study, both literary and figurative divisions of stretches of discourse are employed. Also, the fact that the text-linguistic perspective to discourse is assumed promises, above all, that the texts analyzed here are regarded as authentic and meaningful units of language that essentially acquire their meaning from their use in particular situations.

As Gee (2014: 1) argues, there are numerous ways of doing discourse analysis and none can be said to be better than the others. Furthermore, all of those ways consist of different theories, which themselves consist of different tools with which to analyze discourse. These tools, essentially questions that an analyst asks of his/her data, are not all applicable anytime or anywhere. Instead, some questions work very well for some types of data, but poorly for others. Therefore, the best way of doing discourse analysis in a given situation always depends on the data and the requirements of the study at hand. Similarly, for Johnstone (2002: 4), discourse analysis represents a methodology that can be applied to answer various questions. Nevertheless, she proceeds to elaborate that it is not the diverse set of questions that makes discourse analysis unique among other studies on human language and communication but the ways in which discourse analysts attempt to answer them by investigating language in use. This focus on the structures and functions of real-life occurrences of communication is what essentially constitutes discourse analysis.

### **2.3 Aims and uses of discourse analysis**

As previously stated, there are several different ways of doing discourse analysis, but equally there are at least as many reasons for doing it. The approach taken in this study is a linguistic one, which means that attention in the analysis is mainly paid to the way grammar is used to construct contextual meaning (Gee 2010: 8). In addition, extra focus is directed to the way masculine identities are built and reinforced through certain grammatical choices. Hence, in the present study the ultimate aim is to gain some understanding of how personal and social identities can be constructed, reasserted, and represented in language use. Although this research is merely a case study examining the language use of a single individual – and findings of which cannot therefore be justifiably claimed to apply elsewhere – the motivating factor behind the work is still thoroughly universal: to understand human beings. After all, as Johnstone (2002: 7) believes, in order to really understand how humans work, one needs to understand discourse.

Along with issues related to identity, discourse analysis can be useful in explaining why people in general use language the way they do in certain situations and contexts, how language is acquired, how language change occurs, and so on (Johnstone 2002: 6-7). On the other hand, in the area of discourse analysis there also exists a variety called critical discourse analysis, which desires to address and, perhaps, also contribute to resolving, issues, injustices and problems in social and political matters (Gee 2010: 9). As a whole, the amount of questions discourse analysis is able to help answer is so tremendous that it prompts Johnstone (2002: 7) to suggest that, in fact, whatever

the question about humans in society, discourse analysis can be of service in answering it. One example of such a question especially relevant in the present study is: ‘How can masculinity as a social phenomenon be represented and constructed in language use?’ However, before that question can be sufficiently addressed, a more general overview of masculinity as a theoretical concept is in order.

### **3 MASCULINITY**

In this section, masculinity is, at first, concisely defined theoretically and as a field of academic study before, secondly, a brief overlook is provided into the role of masculinity in sports. Lastly, previous research – which employs discourse analysis as a method – on masculinity in mixed martial arts (MMA) is presented. Also, the key findings of said research are displayed and considered. Although studies conducted in fields other than linguistics and on masculinity elsewhere besides mixed martial arts are included in the discussion in order to provide a sufficient background for the present study, the main focus throughout the section is nonetheless on discourse analytic or linguistic research on masculinity in the sport of mixed martial arts.

#### **3.1 Theorizing masculinity**

Kahn (2009: 2) defines masculinity as “the complex cognitive, behavioral, emotional, expressive, psychosocial, and sociocultural experience of identifying with being male”. This definition clearly encompasses the wide variety of academic theories and fields of study that need to be incorporated and worked in unison, as well as the several aspects of basic human experience that need to be taken into account, in order to fully be able to understand what it means to be male. Jokinen (2000: 210) proposes that being masculine is essentially not being feminine. As an important notion, however, he maintains that the idea of being a man, which masculine theories focus on, does not have biological origins. In other words, a boy is not born with innate manliness programmed into him by evolution which inevitably makes him act in a manly manner. Instead, how to be a man is learned through socialization processes where the boy observes and identifies what is culturally expected of him as a male.

In the Western culture, these expectations of an optimal man, Jokinen (2000: 210) argues, are fivefold: 1) he is physically strong and larger than a woman, 2) he is powerful socially or politically, able to provide for his family, and financially successful, 3) he is emotionally stable and able to rationally solve crises, 4) he is able to protect himself, his loved ones, and his property from both



physical and spiritual harm, and 5) he is heterosexual and a potent lover. However, despite these common nominators within our Western world, Kahn (2009: 4) observes that there are differences between cultures inside this larger sphere (for example, between different European countries) on what is perceived manly and what is not. Moreover, those national cultures are not heterogeneous either, but instead consist of a myriad of smaller cultures, which – like national cultures themselves – include people whose perceptions vary, also depending on the situational setting at hand. Similarly, views on an ideal man are, and always have been, subject to change over time. However, the aforementioned generalizations are useful in the present study in juxtaposing the findings of masculine representations of an individual male mixed martial arts fighter with the general view of what it means to embody masculinity in the Western society.

An important aspect of masculinity to consider is the fact that it is a “hypothetical construct”, which means that it cannot be observed directly or measured physically. Instead, it is assumed that masculinity is a concept which consists of a wealth of human experiences that possibly contain thoughts, behaviors, or emotions (Kahn 2009: 3). Therefore, in addition to the variation on what in fact constitutes masculinity, it is perhaps not at all surprising that there is also a considerable amount of ambivalence and debate among academics as to what actually should be studied when studying masculinity (Kahn 2009: 3). The way masculinity research is approached in the present study is by applying the theory of dominant masculinity, which is a part of the concept of hegemonic masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity – an idea influenced by radical feminism – suggests that people behave in various ways to reinforce the strong foothold of idealized masculinity in an effort to uphold the system of patriarchy (male ruled society), even in cases where it can be detrimental to them (Kahn 2009: 23, 31). Hegemonic masculinity can be seen as a hierarchical system where dominant masculinity ranks above all other forms of masculinity in power and influence (Connell 2001). Distinguished from other kinds of masculinity, such as marginalized masculinity (e.g. socially peripheral ethnic minority masculinity) and subordinate masculinity (e.g. gay men), dominant masculinity highlights and values aggressiveness, competitiveness, money, power, and violence (Connell 1995; Kahn 2009: 32-33). These themes are arguably all, along with their reinforcement, found in abundance in the interviews of Conor McGregor. Since the data gathered for the present study consists in its entirety of written speech, discourse analysis is applied in the examination of these issues.

### 3.2 Discourse analytic studies on masculinity in sports and mixed martial arts

According to Messner (1990: 204), the modern form of organized sport as an institution got its start as a reaction to the social processes (e.g. modernization and urbanization) that worked to erode the status of traditional patriarchal masculinity in the society in the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Messner (1990) argues that, as the society got increasingly feminized, mainly white middle-class men responded by creating and popularizing organized sports (especially violent sports, such as boxing and rugby) in order to protect their status as different and superior compared to women. This emphasis on dominant masculinity, and the often crucial role of violence in scoring and winning, are still very prominent across a wide variety of sports from arm wrestling to ice hockey, but perhaps nowhere is it more central to success than in mixed martial arts, which is the sport of choice for the object of the present study, MMA champion Conor McGregor.

Considering the substantial importance of masculine ideals in sports, it is hardly surprising that the issue has also been studied quite extensively by academics interested in masculinity. However, it seems that masculinity in mixed martial arts has previously been studied only little in the field of linguistics, although some research employing discourse analysis does exist. Channon and Matthews (2015) use discourse analysis in examining representations of male homosexuality and masculinity in MMA with online media as their source of data. They apply inclusive masculinity theory, which, according to Anderson (2009), suggests that there has quite recently emerged a form of inclusive masculinity that does not shun homosexuality or necessarily downplay women, and are able to show that there perhaps is an environment of acceptance of homosexuality in mixed martial arts despite its reputation as an ultra masculine sport (Channon and Matthews 2015).

Hirose and Pih (2010) also include analysis of cultural discourse of MMA in advertisements, the Internet, etc., but do not make the details of those observations shown in their study of the authorization and marginalization of certain types of masculinity in the setting of mixed martial arts. In MMA, the two differing technical styles – striking and submission – seem to superficially demonstrate the rivalry between hegemonic and marginalized masculinities. The article argues, however, that hegemonic masculinities do not entirely defy marginalized masculinities, but instead they maintain an inclusive and mutually constitutive relationship with each other, where unfavored elements are shunned and more positive ones incorporated (Hirose and Pih 2010). Holthuysen (2012) employs discourse analysis as one of the several methods in her anthropological study on how the context of MMA reveals the ways masculinity and masculine hegemony are “shaped, contested, and perpetuated in the United States”. She suggests that masculine ideals do not emerge

by themselves without an influence of economic, social, and political contexts. She also implies, based on examinations on the daily lives of MMA fighters, that there are often clear differences between individual experiences and general (e.g. media) representations of masculinity. Although not explicitly mentioned in the research, Swain (2011), too, incorporates methods that are arguably discourse analytic as part of his study on how masculinity is enacted and demonstrated spectacularly on the Ultimate Fighting Championship's, or UFC's, live Pay-Per-View event and on the company's reality show *The Ultimate Fighter*, as well as in other promotional UFC media. The study also examines how those representations are exploited commercially by the company and its sponsors. It argues that as dominant concepts of masculinity are shown to be conveyed by the UFC fighters, these assets are then not merely associated with those fighters, but instead, they are also identified with the concepts of masculinity the fighters represent.

## **4 THE PRESENT STUDY**

### **4.1 The aim and the research questions**

As noted above, it seems that little previous research has been done on masculinity in mixed martial arts in the field of linguistics. Therefore, the aim of this study is to fill this gap in research by utilizing previous findings on masculinity discovered in the area of discourse studies and applying them in the context of mixed martial arts. More specifically, this study explores how dominant masculinity is represented in the speech of Irish UFC champion and mixed martial arts fighter Conor McGregor. The study will focus on the following questions:

1. What kinds of examples of dominant masculinity in language use can be found in the data?
2. How can Conor McGregor be seen as constructing his dominant masculinity via the utilization of certain types of word choices and utterances?

### **4.2 The data**

The data consists of five written interviews of Conor McGregor collected on the website [www.mmafighting.com](http://www.mmafighting.com), which is a popular online media outlet covering mixed martial arts among other combat sports. The website provides MMA and other combat sports news as well as exclusive interviews with many prominent fighters and other figures associated with combat sports. The interviews for the present study were published between the years 2013 and 2016, and were chosen based on their applicability in studying instances of dominant masculinity in language, which is

why mainly interviews as abundant as possible in said type of language use are examined. Written interviews available on the Internet were gathered as opposed to other types of data, primarily, because of the relative ease of accessing and analyzing them through discourse analytic methods. Also, in regards to the methods of analysis in this particular study, written interview as a format can be viewed as sufficient enough in providing the data needed for a successful analysis. However, it should be noted that a very real concern regarding authenticity does exist in the realm of interviews, as one can never be completely sure whether words typed in an edited article truly reflect the interviewees own words.

### **4.3 The methods of analysis**

As a part of his comprehensive list of tools with which to do discourse analysis, Gee (2014: 112) promotes the usage of “the identities building tool”. He argues that, for a discourse analyst, the main aspect of interest regarding the concept of identity is “how people express their sense of who they are and their multiple other identities through language (Gee 2014: 112).” This, he maintains, also involves being interested in how speakers represent other people’s identities in their speech. Therefore, a discourse analyst studying a stretch of discourse from the point of view of identity also examines what identities the speaker assigns to other people, as well as how he or she presents those identities in relation to their own. As the focus in the present thesis is on the different manifestations of masculine identity in language, Gee’s (2014: 112) identities building tool is applied here as the basis of the analysis. While the tool is deemed sufficient in providing the appropriate questions to ask of the data at hand, the answer to the question of how exactly dominant masculinity – the identity we are interested in here – is conveyed through language is found elsewhere. Connell (1995) lists four main concepts that are highlighted within the domain of dominant masculinity in the Western world: competition, wealth, aggressiveness, and heterosexuality. Inspired by Kahn (2009: 33), the first three of this list, competition, wealth, and aggressiveness, are treated as categories in which to place the instances of language use analyzed in the present study. The reasoning behind the focus on these particular aspects of masculinity is that they are seen as the most prominent and abundant – thus also most defining – types of masculine language use in Conor McGregor's interviews. In addition, a fourth category called ‘mental fortitude’, which in turn is inspired by Jokinen’s (2000: 210) notion that an ideal man is emotionally stable, is also employed, since it is understood that several instances of the data fit this category as well.

## 5 ANALYSIS

### 5.1 “The opponent does not come into the equation. This is my spot.” - Competition

The first of Connell’s (1995) three concepts of dominant masculinity analyzed here is ‘competition’. Mixed martial arts being a sport, no less an individual one, it is perhaps not very surprising that competitors partaking in it tend to be highly competitive individuals who also quite comfortably express themselves verbally in a competitive manner. However, with fighters involved in MMA, there appears to exist quite a bit of variety in how and to what extent they flaunt their own abilities and competitive prospects in comparison to their peers. For many fighters, for example, publicly denying their opponent’s chances altogether – while at the same time praising themselves as the best fighter in the whole sport – can seem a little too excessive or overly arrogant. For Conor McGregor, however, it seems to be the norm. Therefore, an emphasis on competition, which, according to Connell (1995), is a key element in dominant masculine language use, can also be readily found in McGregor’s interviews, instances of which are studied here.

Excerpt 1 below was taken from an August 2013 interview where McGregor was promoting his then-upcoming fight with Max Holloway. In this article however, it is notable that more than the actual fight involving two participants, McGregor is promoting himself.

(1) The opponent does not come into the equation. This is my spot. The Irish are coming home era. Coming to Boston. The Irishmen are coming home to their native land, Boston, United States. The opponent does not come into the equation. I am the main event. If you stick me in the main event, I'm going to steal the show every time (Doyle 2013).

In fact, the line *The opponent does not come into the equation* is the first direct quotation presented in the article, a position which assigns to it a certain level of prominence since it is presumable that it was among the first things uttered by McGregor during the interview. Moreover, he repeats the same exact utterance a few lines further along the excerpt making it seem like even more important a statement, and thus also providing some additional emphasis on his rather extreme stance on competition. In fact, here McGregor is not merely focusing on competition; he is exhausting it to the point where it ceases to exist. In other words, he is saying that he is so good at his sport and so interesting a public persona that it is completely redundant to even discuss his opponents, whoever they may be. Therefore, it seems that for McGregor it is not even a competition since, in his mind, it is impossible for his opponent to win. It appears that, according to McGregor, his opponents do not compare to him skill-wise in MMA competition, nor do they compare to him popularity-wise as

entertainers of the public. The latter part of this claim becomes fairly evident with lines such as *This is my spot* and *I am the main event. If you stick me in the main event, I'm going to steal the show every time*. Interestingly enough, although the fight McGregor is promoting here was never going to be the actual main event – i.e. the final and most promoted fight – of UFC Fight Night 26: Shogun vs. Sonnen, the UFC event McGregor's fight was a part of (Sherdog 2013), McGregor seemingly nevertheless views himself as a commodity worthy of such status in this interview.

As another example of language use focusing on competition, Excerpt 2 is taken from a December 2015 interview ahead of McGregor's featherweight title fight against then-champion José Aldo. While preparing to face his most accomplished – and arguably also most difficult – opponent up to that point of his career, McGregor's belief in his own greatness merely seemed to intensify and diversify.

(2) I feel this one will be a spectacle. This one will be a master class. This one will be the changing of a guard, me bringing in a new era in fighting, in approach, in everything. I am a man with something to prove and a man with something to prove is a dangerous individual. But at the same time, I am calm. So I will go in calm, dangerous and look to show the world the new age (Raimondi 2015).

By using words such as *spectacle* and *master class*, McGregor is on this occasion referring to himself, not only as an immensely talented fighter, but also as an entertainer par excellence. It seems as if McGregor considers himself to be so much better than Aldo that he can concentrate on winning in the most entertaining fashion possible as opposed to focusing only on winning. In addition, McGregor claims very confidently that *This one will be the changing of a guard, me bringing in a new era in fighting, in approach, in everything*. Employing the future tense *will* without any hedging he is predicting rather boldly and definitely that he is going to be something never-before-seen; someone who is bound to single-handedly revolutionize the whole sport. These types of competitive language use that have been derived from the two excerpts and analyzed in this sub-section can be seen as rather clear examples of the kind of emphasis on competition Connell (1995) proposes as central to dominant masculinity. In its essence, competition stems from comparison and in McGregor's case it seems that he utilizes language that portrays him considerably better than his opposition in nearly everything in order to construct his own dominant masculinity as the ideal man, i.e. a man who performs exceedingly well in competition.

## 5.2 “You're damn right I want a piece of that pie.” - Wealth

The second of Connell's (1995) dominant masculinity concepts analyzed here is 'wealth'. According to Kahn (2009: 32-33), being wealthy is one of the key conditions of successful negotiation of masculinity within the Western culture of dominant masculinity. This is a conclusion to which Jokinen (2000: 210) has come as well, noting that an optimal man in the Western world is financially successful. Becoming financially successful in a truly significant manner is often a very real possibility in professional sports, and mixed martial arts is no exception. Although it still remains a rather unrecognized sport globally compared to, for example, football (soccer) or basketball, MMA, too, has its own super star athletes, most of whom compete in the UFC – the sport's premier organization –, and are able to earn millions in fight purses and sponsorship money. However, the fighters who have been able to achieve such an esteemed financial status in mixed martial arts are few and far between (Kirsch 2016). As it happens, Conor McGregor is included in that small group of individuals and is, in fact, the wealthiest when it comes to MMA fighters (UFC 2016; Forbes 2016). Moreover, talking about money, and its importance to him in his career, is not something McGregor shies away from as can be seen in Excerpt 3.

(3) You're damn right I want a piece of that pie. Let's not get it twisted, I like pie too. So I'm coming for some of my pie also. Like I said, I think I played a nice role in that number. What was it? It was estimated at two billion at one stage before I came along. I remember when I first started here, it was a two-billion dollar franchise. I remember hearing that much. And now, since I came on, it's four billion. And the year before it was sold is my year, numbers-wise. I played a nice role in that too, so the number motivated me (Al-Shatti 2016).

In Excerpt 3, McGregor is discussing the recent sale of the UFC for 4 billion dollars and his own role in increasing the company's net worth via breaking several records as one of their most famous fighters ever. In reference to the historically high selling price, McGregor asserts *You're damn right I want a piece of that pie. Let's not get it twisted, I like pie too. So I'm coming for some of my pie also*. Thus, by employing quite stern phrases of assurance, such as *You're damn right* and *Let's not get it twisted*, McGregor is willing to make it explicitly evident that acquiring a share of that money is very important to him. In addition, the phrase *I'm coming for* adds a certain level of determination to his message and only works to further highlight his interest in the money. Connell's (1995) proposition of an emphasis on affluence as key to the construction of dominant masculinity can be seen in practice also in the latter part of the excerpt where McGregor reveals a rather keen interest in the UFC's financial matters. Here, most interestingly, McGregor suggests he *played a nice role* in the company's growth into a \$4 billion enterprise. This act of assuming a role

in expediting such a large-scale financial success can be interpreted as quite a distinct case of emphasizing his monetary prowess on McGregor's part, not least because of the word *nice*, which implies that his impact from his own understanding was, in fact, quite significant.

In another excerpt addressing financial issues and monetary success, Excerpt 4, McGregor is reflecting on an event, which happened in the wake of his successful debut in the UFC, where he received the opportunity to spend time with UFC president Dana White driving around downtown Las Vegas. From this example it becomes quite evident that major financial prosperity had already been one of McGregor's career goals for several years before his arrival in the UFC. Also, the phrase *In my head, this was always going on* suggests that not only did he place great value on getting rich through mixed martial arts, he was likewise always confident that eventually he would achieve that status. This firm self-confidence in one's ability to ultimately become financially successful in their career, even though the onset of which might have not been very glamorous, can be seen as further indication of dominant masculine ideology in Conor McGregor's speech, on account of it also entailing the concepts of mental fortitude and competition, which are discussed elsewhere in this study (Jokinen 2000: 210; Kahn 2009: 33).

(4) I used to drive my girlfriend in a Peugeot 206," said McGregor. "And I don't know if you have Peugeot 206s over in America, but they're little small bangers, and there was smoke coming down in the engine, it used to shake down the road, but in my head I was cruising down the Las Vegas strip in a Ferrari with the don besides me and then fast forward five years and what happens? I'm cruising down the Strip with the Don. In my head, this was always going on (Doyle 2013).

### **5.3 “That's it, his head is coming off. It's as simple as that.” - Aggressiveness**

Jokinen (2000: 210) argues that, in its most simplified form, being masculine is not being feminine. Therefore, men who strive to adhere to the masculine ideal naturally require some kinds of tools or concrete factors with which to clearly separate themselves from femininity. Messner (1990: 204) refers to a great body of feminist research when positing that one of the most central tools of that kind is violence, or at least the threat of it. Furthermore, as Jokinen (2000: 210) claims, an ideal man is physically strong and larger than a woman so, by that definition already, he should hold a physical power advantage over her. Because of this situation that mainly stems from social constructions of gender, although does have some origins in biology as well, and particularly its crucial role in dividing the masculine from the feminine, it is perhaps quite predictable that violence and violent threats work effectively in constructing dominant masculinity also in cases where there are no women directly involved (Messner 1990: 205). Such are the circumstances in this subsection



where the third of Connell's (1995) dominant masculinity concepts 'aggressiveness' is analyzed. Although it is acknowledged in the present study in the vein of Messner (1990: 203) that 'violence' and 'aggression' can be two distinct phenomena, the concept of 'aggressiveness' here is inspired by Kahn (2009: 33) and hence understood as 'violent aggressiveness', since it is assessed that the data represents such extreme examples of aggressive language use that this type of conceptualization is justified.

The utterances in Excerpt 5 are selected from an article where McGregor is discussing his opponent Nate Diaz before their fight as the main event of UFC 196 in Las Vegas.

(5) But again, ring the bell, I'm coming out fast. ... That's it, his head is coming off. It's as simple as that.

...

Now I came hunting for him. He's trying to say people are afraid to fight him. I hunted him down, stalked him, got him. Now I have him trapped on Saturday night (Raimondi 2016).

Mixed martial arts being a full-contact combat sport, it is quite ordinary for the language of its athletes to involve aggression – and even threats of violence – towards their opponents, but the phrase *his head is coming off* can be seen as something slightly different. Firstly, the element of exaggeration is what separates this utterance from a simple prediction of the events of a fight, since it should be considered very unlikely for a fighter to actually be decapitated in a regulated mixed martial arts bout. Secondly, the ultra-violent brutality of the statement is notable as McGregor is effectively predicting that he is going to kill Diaz during their competition. In accordance with Kahn's (2009: 33) notion of the accentuation of aggression and violence within the building of the dominant masculine ideal, McGregor is therefore presenting himself in this article as the embodiment of dominant masculinity. In addition, McGregor's use of metaphors in the form of the verbs *hunt*, *stalk*, and *trap* can be seen as elemental in this construction of the masculine ideal because of the way he seems to utilize those words in displaying himself as a 'hunter', thus tapping into an image of a man with predatory senses, supreme physical conditioning, and violent skills honed to near-perfection – truly, the original dominant masculine ideal. On the other hand, at the same time McGregor is portraying his opponent Nate Diaz as his 'prey' which can be interpreted as an act of assigning Diaz with the feminine qualities he wants to dominate and have power over.

Another example of aggressiveness in Conor McGregor's speech is presented in Excerpt 6 and is a case of him describing the change that has taken place in his behavior towards his opponent José Aldo from the earlier parts of the promotion tour of their featherweight championship contest right until the week of the fight.

(6) Back in the World Tour was a different time. Like I said, I acted true to myself in that moment. Now it is a new time. Now, war is upon us. So, I am calm, cold, ruthless and ready to take out the body that's in front of me (Raimondi 2015).

In comparison to Excerpt 5, this particular stretch of text can perhaps be seen as more of an example of ‘calculated aggression’ of sorts, since, although the aggressive expressions (e.g. *ready to take out the body*) are certainly there, the aggression derives more from the metaphorical setting of the utterances rather than openly violent threats. In the excerpt at hand, when talking about *the World Tour*, McGregor is explaining that his behavior in the early stages of him and Aldo promoting the fight together internationally, which could be described as having been very animated, outrageous, and at times even arrogant, was a representation of his true self. Then again, at the time of speaking to the media, i.e. mere days before the fight, he is saying: *Now, war is upon us. So, I am calm, cold, ruthless and ready to take out the body that's in front of me*. Therefore, at this stage with the fight looming in the very near future, McGregor has adopted the role of a ‘soldier’, who is tranquil, ready to fulfill his duty, and focused only on the task at hand. So, at this point he is treating the fight as something quite impersonal – a *war*, where he has his own tasks and responsibilities he has to undertake, and where unnecessarily strong emotional reactions can be detrimental. As Jokinen (2000) is able to show, being a warrior fighting a just war, and hence partaking in violent battles, is at the very core of the masculine ideal. Consequently, McGregor desires to be associated with this dominant masculine image of war being the ultimate proving ground for ‘real’ men, which, for centuries, has enjoyed widespread admiration in the Western culture. However, more than merely tapping into the dominant masculinity of war, McGregor is also reinforcing his own role as the embodiment of the masculine ideal by characterizing his demeanor as *calm, cold, and ruthless* (Jokinen 2000: 210). In so doing, McGregor is presenting himself as emotionally stable and displaying ‘mental fortitude’, which is the topic of the last category and is analyzed next.

#### **5.4 “I don’t complain, I don’t bitch, I don’t moan.” - Mental fortitude**

The last of the four key concepts of dominant masculinity analyzed in the present study is ‘mental fortitude’, which is inspired by Jokinen’s (2000: 210) list of the five attributes expected of an optimal man in the Western societies. Here, ‘mental fortitude’ entails emotional stability, determination, and, in a view supported by Kimmel (2003, cited in Kahn 2009: 57), courage, too. In the article containing Excerpt 7, McGregor discusses his upcoming fight against Max Holloway. However, throughout the text he mainly opts to direct his focus elsewhere, as is also the case in

Excerpt 7 where, instead of Holloway, McGregor contrasts himself to his originally scheduled opponent Andy Ogle, who had to withdraw from the August 17, 2013 fight due to medical reasons.

(7) I don't complain, I don't bitch, I don't moan. The fact I have to travel around, he had to travel as well, to Canada and to Vegas to get the visa, I'm sure that played into the decision. Like I don't bitch, I don't moan, I get it done. I can travel around and disrupt my training because I'm always in shape. I squeeze it in anywhere (Doyle 2013).

Here, McGregor assumes that the arduous pre-fight responsibilities of a UFC fighter competing abroad influenced Ogle's decision not to fight on that date. Moreover, he accuses Ogle of *complaining*, *bitching*, and *moaning*, while at the same time he renounces himself of such activities. The manner in which he executes this renunciation can also be interpreted as adding to its masculinity, because of the determination in the way he repeats the same sentence structure (Subject + Verb + Not) three times in *I don't complain*, *I don't bitch*, *I don't moan* (Jokinen 2000: 210). By associating those aforementioned three words to Ogle, McGregor is also valuing himself above his almost-opponent as a more resilient and tough individual who is not easily upset. This can be interpreted as a means for McGregor to present himself according to the masculine ideal, i.e. as someone who is dominantly masculine, since men in our western culture are expected to be emotionally stable (Jokinen, 2000: 210). In addition, by using the derogatory word *bitch*, which because of its full dictionary definition can be seen as referring to an inherently feminine activity (Merriam-Webster 2016), McGregor is assigning feminine qualities to Ogle while simultaneously promoting his own masculinity. After all, as Jokinen (2000: 210) proposes, being masculine is essentially not being feminine.

In Excerpt 8, on the other hand, McGregor is providing an explanation for his decision to fight Chad Mendes at UFC 189 despite having a severely injured knee.

(8) I showed up because nothing can break me. No amount of adversity I cannot conquer and that's it. My mind is strong, stronger than anything and that's it. I went in with complete belief that my shots would land (Thomas 2015).

Once again, the dominant masculine ideal is being reflected in the determination found in McGregor's speech. This determination is achieved with very confident and matter-of-fact statements, such as *nothing can break me* and *No amount of adversity I cannot conquer*, but here, too, through repetition as well. Firstly, the first three sentences *I showed up because nothing can break me*, *No amount of adversity I cannot conquer and that's it*, and *My mind is strong, stronger*

*than anything and that's it* all emphasize the extraordinary mental strength and resolve McGregor believes he possesses. Secondly, the phrase *that's it* is repeated twice, which implies that in McGregor's mind these attributes of his are absolutely unquestionable. Moreover, the word 'strong' as in *strong* and *stronger* is also repeated, this time highlighting one of the key aspects of dominant masculinity: strength, both physical and mental (Jokinen 2000: 210). Lastly, the sentence *I went in with complete belief that my shots would land* emanates masculinity through courage in the vein of Kimmel (2003), since McGregor is effectively claiming that he entered a full-contact fight without a single doubt in his mind about his strikes hitting his opponent.

As can be interpreted from the excerpts analyzed above, several instances of public language use by Conor McGregor lend themselves to be categorized quite efficiently into the four main types of the dominant masculine ideal inspired by Connell (1995, 2001) and Jokinen (2000), which were chosen to provide the theoretical structure of this analysis. It appears that McGregor utilizes discourses of competition, wealth, aggressiveness, and mental fortitude in a noticeably effective manner in constructing his public persona as a male adhering to the dominant masculine ideal. This also includes McGregor asserting dominance over his opponents through language via assigning feminine qualities to them, and is achieved with the aid of salient word choices, metaphors, and word repetition.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In this study, I set out to research how dominant masculinity is represented in the speech of Irish UFC champion and popular mixed martial arts fighter Conor McGregor. For this purpose, five interviews of him were chosen from [www.mmafighting.com](http://www.mmafighting.com), which is a prominent online media outlet covering mixed martial arts among other combat sports. Applying the fourfold categorization of key dominant masculinity concepts, which was inspired by Connell (1995) and Jokinen (2000) and includes competition, wealth, aggressiveness, and mental fortitude, excerpts of those interviews were then chosen. The choices were made based on the excerpts' relevance regarding dominantly masculine language which resulted in a total of eight excerpts being analyzed; two per each concept category. Finally, in the vein of Gee (2014: 112), discourse analytic strategies were employed in studying how McGregor expresses his and other people's identities through language according to the dominant masculine ideal.

Regarding the research questions this study set out to answer, the results of the analysis suggest that Conor McGregor seemingly regularly and comfortably exploits all of the aforementioned key

concepts of dominant masculinity in constructing his public image as the embodiment of the dominant masculine ideal. In so doing, he employs several different linguistic strategies such as salient word choices, metaphors, and word repetition to his advantage. Moreover, he appears to noticeably assign feminine qualities to his athletic competitors in order to emphasize his own masculinity, which is in line with Jokinen's (2000: 210) proposal of masculinity essentially representing everything that is not feminine. Much like in the findings of previous research, it is evident here, too, that masculinity as a phenomenon is very prominent in the realm of mixed martial arts and its fighters.

Because of the flaunting of ultra-masculine ideals described in this thesis, which appears to be a fixture in the speech of some MMA fighters who are able to gain widespread media coverage, it is perhaps beneficial to consider the possible broader social implications. After all, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 846) note, popular athletes are often strongly admired – especially by children and young people – and therefore obtain the power of affecting those people's values and the ways they think (e.g. about how men should behave) whether they desire it or not. Thus, it is potentially very important to gain an understanding of how MMA fighters publicly construct their masculine selves and promote dominant masculine ideals as the sport of mixed martial arts only continues to increase its global influence. On the other hand, in order to achieve the goal of understanding what effects such language use can have on the admiring public and others within its influence, studies much more extensive than the present one would be needed. Secondly, although the present study may succeed in making visible how Conor McGregor employs dominant masculine language in his interviews, hardly any conclusions about MMA fighters in general can be drawn because of the limited scope of the analysis. Thirdly, it is noteworthy that written and edited interviews as data pose some reliability issues, since it is unclear whether they truly reflect the interviewees own words. In spite of its limitations, however, I believe this study carries the potential of informing future research of the fact that substantial constructions of dominant masculinity can occur in the public language use of highly popular mixed martial arts athletes, the full magnitude and implications of which are yet to be revealed.

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