

The Second Meaning:

Uncovering the Linguistic Interpretation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

Ruby Rosenfeld with Professor Chun and Elkins
IPHS 200: Programming Humanity, Fall 2022

Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* is one of the most influential works of feminist theory as it marks a period of change for feminism that pushed the movement into its next iteration. With time *The Second Sex* has become a staple of feminist pedagogy teaching individuals how to take action and expand their definition of gender. However, what lies beneath the surface of Beauvoir's big ideas? Through the employment of topic modeling, I will look to examine the differences between Beauvoir's widely accepted claims and the frequency and topical clustering of the very words she used to articulate them. Through an analysis of these differences, I will hope to answer the question of does the language used accurately reflect Beauvoir's intended meaning? Does it reflect the audiences take away?

Introduction

Published in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a revolutionary work of theory that is often credited for laying the foundation of feminist theory as well as modern feminist movements. Without this text, it is said that there would be no feminism as we know it. Thus, *The Second Sex* is one of the most referenced texts in feminist literature; it is often used to attempt to define what it means to be woman, argue for the destruction of gender hierarchies, and above all, call for the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchal systems. While highly influenced by French existentialist thought, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* redefined American feminism.

Scan the QR code to view individual topic word clusters & the importance of limiting the amount of topics



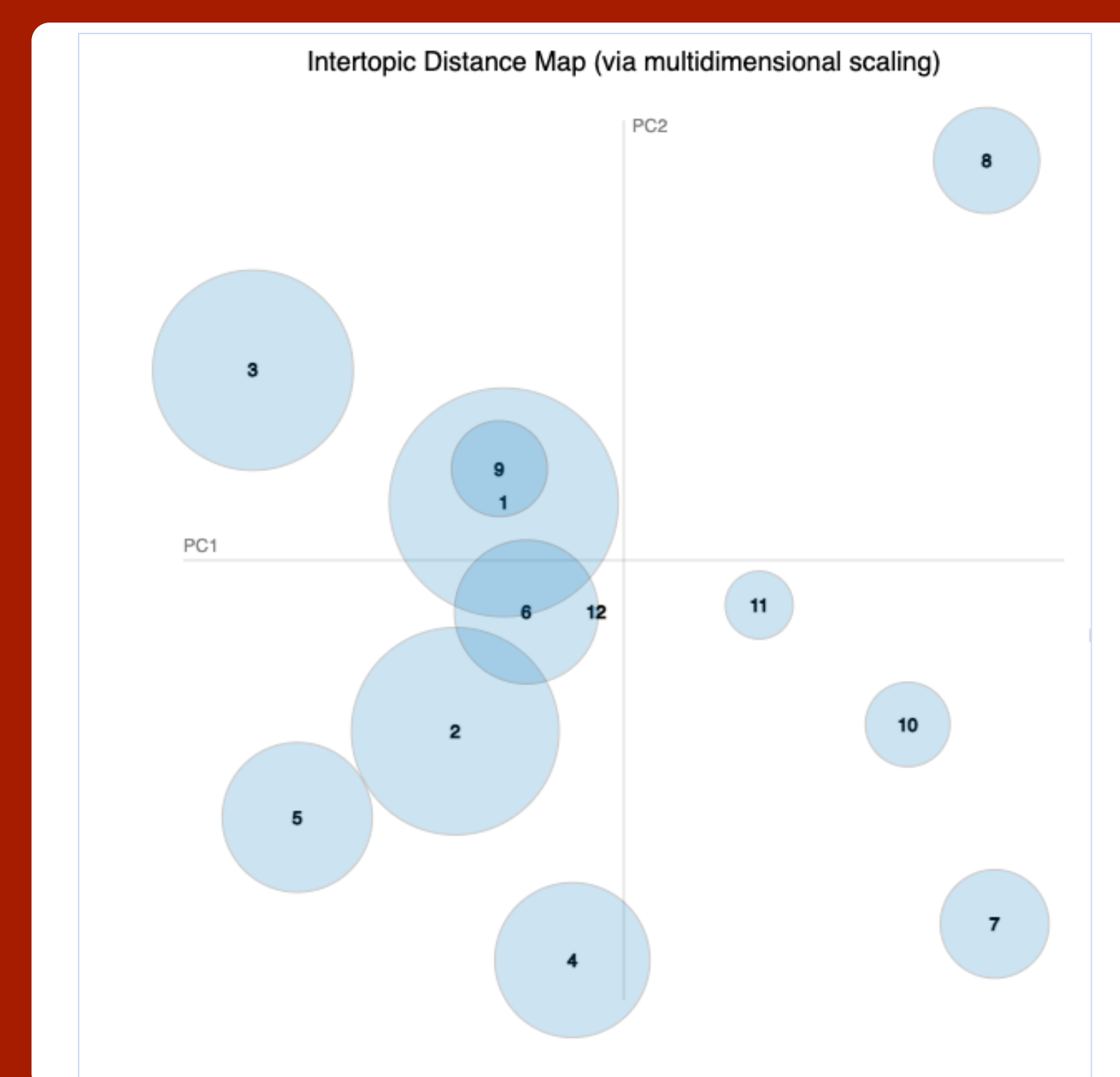
Methodology

In order to gather data, I uploaded the raw text of *The Second Sex* into a Google Colab notebook. This notebook was designed for Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) Topic Modeling with Gensim. Topic modeling is a text mining tool used to detect hidden meanings within large literary works. With the addition of LDA, topic modeling sorts the text's frequently used words based on proximity and assumed relation into "topics." I examined these topics to compare the frequently used language in the text to the true themes of the book. Individually, these topics were analyzed by reviewing the LDA Topic Modeling generated lists, to view these word clusters scan the QR code in the bottom left; however, I looked at the visualization to provide context and understand the assumed relationality of the topics. In the visualization, each topic is represented by a size circle plot. The size is determined by the coherence of the terms within the topic; the larger the circle, the more coherent. The location of each plot on the graph is determined by how related the topics seem to be as determined by the algorithm.

Since the algorithm alters the data with each new run of the code, I made the active decision to analyze this dataset of 12 topics as it seemed to spark interesting discourse while providing minimal overlap. I decided upon this number of topics because with the addition of more topics, the less coherent they became and the harder they were to see on the visualization. To better understand the importance of limiting topics, scan the QR code in the bottom left to view what the model would look like with 20 and 30 topics.

Results

Based on the findings it becomes clear that there is a central theme of *The Second Sex* that rests within Beauvoir's literal terminology. This theme is defined by topics 1, 9, 6, 2, and 5; these topics all overlap or touch each other and have the largest coherences of all topics. Looking closely, topic 9, whose language generally refers to psychology, rests entirely within topic 1, which has a focus on sexuality, situating its significance at the center of 1; it does not have a terminological effect of its own. Topic 6, which has heavy themes of religion, overlaps with both 1 and 2, which focuses on homosexuality, allowing it to act as a bridge between topics; and topic 5, mainly emotions related, touches 2 creating an influencing effect. In close relation to these topics is topic 3 of substantial coherence. This topic focuses heavily on pregnancy and children. Surrounding this central convergence are topics 4, 7, 10, 11, and 8, all with much smaller coherences. The terminology of these topics include words that relate to politics, history, the medicalized body, and mysticism. This language is far different than that used in the central topics. While this does not negate the importance of these topics, it does show that they are rendered less significant by the LDA algorithm. To view the full lists of topics, scan the QR code in the bottom left corner.



Further Research

In the original design of this project, I intended to analyze *The Second Sex* in relation to the works of two other feminist theorists: Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed. By examining these three theorists and their most influential works, I hoped to understand and visualize the trends within language across feminist waves. If given more time and resources, I would love to expand upon this project by comparing this data against that of Butler and Ahmed's works to better understand the progression of feminist language.

Conclusion

Currently, *The Second Sex* is often cited as the earliest long-form publication that demanded a new definition of woman that existed beyond that of man. It is understood to focus on women's liberation and the very existence of gender, however, through topic modeling it appears as though this is not the case. The literal language used by Beauvoir appears to most frequently surround themes of sexuality rather than the magnitude of issues related to gender equality that are typically associated with the text. Topics 1, 9, 6, 2, and 5 define the central terminology used and are all related to women's sexuality. Words such as "wedding", "orgasm", "coitus", and "virginity" all fall within the top ten most frequently used words of topic 1; this topic of highest coherence provides the basis of sexuality with blatantly sexual language. Topic 2's most common words are "lesbian", "homosexual", and "homosexuality", thus defining the deviant sexual identity of women. The bridge between these two topics is topic 6 which is heavily defined by religious vocabulary: "salvation", "judge", "lord", "angel", and "evil". By having religiosity connect heteronormative sexuality to homosexuality creates a narrative where religion is a restrictive institution as it condemns both women's sexuality as a whole, as well as any sexuality that exists beyond straight. At the heart of these central topics, is topic 9 which lives entirely within topic 1. The terminology of this topic is purely related to psychology and Freud's theory of penis envy. While together these topics frame a larger literal narrative of sexuality, a concept that Beauvoir repeatedly denied being a part of this text, this is not the most surprising element of these results. Rather, it is the fact that Beauvoir's most common words are those that are rooted in patriarchal institutions, systems, and beliefs. This directly contradicts her intended arguments, as instead of liberating woman from man, she herself is still placing women within male-dominated systems. This is seen through the frequent employment of Freud, religion where God is a man and Adam created Eve, and the fact that purity is so often referenced.

This is not to say that the ideas often associated with *The Second Sex* does not exist within the language. It does, however, it is solely found in the outlying plots that have low coherences and are distant from the central convergence. It is here where words such as "property", "oppression", "abortion", "vote", "feminist", "revolution", "domestic", "division", "community", "patriarchy", and "individuality" are found. These are the words typically related to *The Second Sex* yet they exist on the sidelines far away from the core terminology. Through this shocking division of language, it is clear that language does not always reflect author intent or audience take away.

Acknowledgements & References

Thank you to Professor Chun and Professor Elkins for their guidance and support in completing this project.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. 1949.
Butler, Judith. "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*." *Yale French Studies*, no. 72, 1986, pp. 35-49.
Thurman, Judith. Introduction to Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex." *The New York Times*, May 27, 2010.