

## Linguistic Analysis of Gender` Speech

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**Abstract.** The current article discusses the main features of gender linguistics, especially women`s conversation peculiarities in common cases. An important strand of language and gender research has focused on how female and male speakers interact with one another, in a variety of contexts ranging from informal conversations to more formal meetings, interviews, seminars and so on.

**Key words:** *gender, speech, conversation, politeness, social inequality, behavior.*

**Introduction.** It is not a myth that gender influences language use-but that is not simply because men and women are naturally different kinds of people. Rather, gender influences linguistic behavior because of its impact on other things that influence linguistic behavior more directly. The way people use language can be related to the social network they belong to, their habitual activities, their identities as particular kinds of people and their status relative to others. Each of these things is potentially affected by gender divisions which are characteristics of our society [3] .

There is a substantial body of evidence that women and men, and girls and boys interact, to some extent, in different ways. Such differences as occur have often been thought to disadvantage female speakers in mixed-sex interaction. This area of language and gender is one that has a number of practical as well as theoretical implications: within education, for instance, there have been concerns about potential inequalities in classroom talk [5]. Some research has also focused on potential misunderstandings said to arise from gender differences in communication – a point we return to below.

There are links between studies of gender and talk discussed in this section and the studies of spoken interaction discussed before. In both cases, researchers have been interested in how talk between people is organized; in differences in conversational style between different social and cultural groups; and in conversational outcomes – what speakers accomplish during the course of routine interactions. In this section,

we review briefly the results of empirical studies carried out since the early 1970s, which have provided evidence of female and male conversational styles.

The bulk of this work has been carried out among speakers of English in ‘western’ contexts such as the USA, the UK and New Zealand. We then examine some areas of debate that have grown out of this research.

**Literature review.** Robin Lakoff (1975) claimed that women use a number of language features that, collectively, indicate uncertainty and hesitancy. These features, argued Lakoff, deny women the opportunity to express themselves strongly, and make what they are talking about appear trivial. Lakoff’s claims have been associated with a deficit model of women’s language use – she seemed to be suggesting that the way women speak is inadequate in several respects. She related these claims to social inequalities between women and men, arguing that women’s speaking style denied them access to power. Lakoff’s claims were based on informal observations and her own intuitions about language use. They have given rise to considerable debate, and have been investigated in several empirical studies, some of which we refer to below. Lakoff herself has revisited these early ideas in a later publication based on her work [7].

In an early study of interruption patterns that has now become something of a classic, Don Zimmerman and Candace West (1975) found that more interruptions occurred in mixed-sex than in single-sex conversations; and that virtually all the ‘mixed-sex’ interruptions were perpetrated by men. Zimmerman and West’s approach differed from that of Lakoff in that it was based on an empirical study of conversation. They also focused, not on women’s inadequacy, but on men’s oppressive speaking behaviour. Zimmerman and West saw interruption as a violation of a speaker’s right to complete their turn. In interrupting women, they argued, men are denying women’s equal status as conversational partners. Zimmerman and West’s work has been associated with a dominance position on women’s and men’s language. They related local interactional behaviour to the greater degree of power more generally available to men: ‘there are definite and patterned ways in which the power and dominance enjoyed by men in other contexts

are exercised in their conversational interaction with women' [8]. Zimmerman and West followed up their research in several later papers. The illustrations of interruptions shown in the box were cited in a study published in 1983.

Interpretations in terms of power or dominance have been common among other researchers. In an analysis of conversations between couples, Pamela Fishman (1983) found that women gave more conversational support than men. They expressed interest in their partner's conversational topic, and made more frequent use of minimal responses such as mmh, yeah and right, indicating their involvement. Topics raised by men therefore had a greater chance of success (of being elaborated upon and pursued) than those raised by women. Fishman saw women's conversational supportiveness as an 'expected' characteristic of being female: women are expected to keep conversation going. But she also related her

interpretation to power. Power, she argued, is 'a human accomplishment, situated in everyday interaction' [4]. It is partly through interaction that the hierarchical relations between women and men are constructed and maintained.

An alternative explanation of women's and men's language use derives from the work of Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982). Maltz and Borker argued that women and men constitute different 'gender subcultures'.

**Methodology.** They learn the rules of 'friendly interaction' as children when a great deal of interaction takes place in single-sex peer groups. Certain linguistic features are used to signal membership of their own gender group, and to distinguish themselves from the contrasting group. These linguistic features come to have slightly different meanings within the two gender subcultures.

For example, in the case of female speakers, minimal responses simply indicate attention – those speakers are listening to the conversation.

For male speakers, however, they indicate agreement with the point being made. It is not surprising, therefore, that female speakers should use them more than male speakers. Such differences in conversational style, however, frequently give rise to misunderstandings when women and men communicate with one another.

As Cameron claims, there is a complex relationship between language and gender in

the academic studies of language and gender. Holmes (cited in Bergwall 1999) formulates six candidate universals regarding language and gender:

1. Women and men develop different patterns of language use
2. Women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do.
3. Women tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more often than men do.
4. Women tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase solidarity, while especially in formal contexts men tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase their power and status.
5. Women use more standard forms than men from the same social group in the same social context.
6. Women are stylistically more flexible than men [2,3].

There are many features of interaction which have been shown to differentiate the talk of women and men in particular contexts. Mrs Fleming's distinction identifies one of them. In this section, I will discuss two others: interrupting behaviour and conversational feedback.

Wanda: Did you see here that two sociologists have just proved that men interrupt women all the time? They –

Ralph: Who says?

Wanda: Candace West of Florida State and Don Zimmerman of the University of California at Santa Barbara. They taped a bunch of private conversations, and guess what they found. When two or three women are talking, interruptions are about equal. But when a man talks to a woman, he makes 96 per cent of the interruptions. They think it's a dominance trick men aren't even aware of. But –

Ralph: These people have nothing better to do than eavesdrop on interruptions?

Wanda: – but women make 'retrievals' about one third of the time. You know, they pick up where they were left off after the man –

Ralph: Surely not all men are like that Wanda?

Wanda: – cuts in on what they were saying. Doesn't that –

Ralph: Speaking as a staunch supporter of feminism, I deplore it

Wanda. Wanda: (*sigh*) I know, dear.

Ralph here illustrates a pattern for which there is a great deal of research evidence. The most widely quoted study, and the one referred to by Wanda in example, collected examples of students' exchanges in coffee bars, shops and other public places on a tape-recorder carried by one of the researchers.

Empirical studies of gender and talk have documented several specific features of conversational style that are said to differentiate between female and male speakers.

Examples of these are:

*Amount of talk: male speakers have been found to talk more than females, particularly in formal or public contexts.*

*Interruptions: male speakers interrupt female speakers more than vice versa.*

*Conversational support: female speakers more frequently use features that provide support and encouragement for other speakers, for example 'minimal responses' such as mmh and yeah. tentativeness: there are claims that female speakers use features that make their speech appear tentative and uncertain, such as 'hedges' that weaken the force of an utterance ( 'I think maybe . . .', 'sort of', 'you know') and certain types of 'tag questions' (questions tagged on to statements, such as ('It's so hot, isn't it?')).*

*Compliments: a wider range of compliments may be addressed to women than to men, and women also tend to pay more compliments.*

Such empirical studies show tendencies: they suggest that women tend to speak in one way and men in another. Clearly not all women, or all men, talk in the same way, and the way people talk also differs considerably in different contexts. These are points to which we return below.

**Conclusion.** Overall, however, findings such as those listed have given rise to a number of general claims. One long-running area of debate has concerned whether

female and male styles are better interpreted in terms of cultural differences between the sexes, or in terms of the relative power of female and male speakers.

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