

Discourse & Gender

*'One is not born, but rather becomes
a woman'*

Simone de Beauvoir

Performativity

- A person learns how **to do** and ‘**display**’ being a woman in a particular setting. People **perform** particular **identities** through the **use** of language.
 - This is mostly done **unconsciously** as we **repeat acts** (**gestures, movement, ways of using language**) that people from **our own gender** around us **use**.
- These are **not natural** acts, they are **acquired** from **interaction** in a certain **society**.

Man or Woman?

Adorable!
Charming!
Sweet !

Great!
Terrific!
Cool!

Two Approaches

Dominance:

- This approach views the **difference** in **language use** as a **result** of male domination that **women's language** is a way to keep women in a **subordinate position**.
- **Lakoff 1975:** Found that **women** use more **overt polite forms, hedges, indirectness...** Thus, **less linguistic power**.

Difference:

- This approach argues that **girls** and **boys live** in different subcultures, and as a **result** they **grow up learning different ways of using language**.

Critique of Approaches

- In a critique of both the **dominance** and **difference** approaches, Cameron (1998) **argues** that the **expression of gender** is always context-specific.
 - He suggests **viewing gender** by looking at **how** people in **particular social** and **cultural interactions do gender** in their use of language.

Language and Gender

- The **relationship** between **gender** and **language** is always **indirect** and **mediated** by other **factors** **such as:**
 - **Particular roles:** mother, teacher, wife... etc.
 - **Activities:** shopping, praying, gossiping... etc.
 - **Personality traits:** modest, arrogant... etc.
- The person is said to have **multiple identities** which **may all play at the same time or at different contexts.**

Politeness and Gender

When comparing men and women languages, women:

- Apologize more.
- Use indirect speech acts.
- Use more indirect strategies.
 - More positive politeness strategy.
 - Example: 'Hello gorgeous'
 - If uttered by a woman to her friend → positive politeness and expression of intimacy.
 - If uttered by a man on the street → An act of harassment.

In Living Language **George Keith** and **John Shuttleworth** record suggestions that:

Women

- talk **more** than men
- talk **too much**
- are **more polite**
- are **indecisive/hesitant**
- **complain** and **nag**
- ask **more questions**
- **support each other**
- are **more co-operative**

Men

- **swear more**
- don't talk about **emotions**
- talk about **sport more**
- talk about **women** and **machines** in the same way
- **insult** each other frequently
- are **competitive** in **conversation**
- **dominate conversation**
- **speak** with **more authority**
- give **more commands**
- **interrupt more**

More Differences

Robin Lakoff, in 1975, published an influential account of women's language. She believes that:

1. **Hedge:** Using phrases like “sort of”, “kind of”, “it seems like”, and so on.
2. **Super polite forms:** “Would you mind...”, “I'd appreciate it if...”, “...if you don't mind”.
3. **Tag questions:** “You're going to dinner, aren't you?”
4. **Empty adjectives:** Nice, divine, lovely, adorable, and so on
5. **Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation:** Formal forms and clear enunciation.
6. **Minimal responses:** Women use responses like 'yeah' or 'mhm' to signal their active involvement in the conversation and to support the current speaker.
7. **Have a special lexicon:** Women use more words for colours and men use more words for sports.

More Differences

Robin Lakoff believes that:

8. **Question intonation in declarative statements:** Women make **declarative statements** into **questions** by **raising the pitch** of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing **uncertainty**.
 - **Example:** “What school do you attend? Eton College?”
9. **Apologise more:** “I'm sorry, but I think that...”
10. **Modal constructions:** Such as *can, would, should, ought*
 - **Example:** “Should we turn up the heat?”
11. **Indirect commands and requests:** For example, “My, isn't it cold in here?” - a request to turn the heat on or close a window.
12. **More intensifiers:** Especially ***so*** and ***very***
 - **Example:** “I am *so* glad you came!”
13. **Lack a sense of humour:** Women do not tell jokes well and often don't understand the punch line of jokes.