

# Gender Differences and Language Variation: A Theoretical Framework

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## Abstract

Many psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and other researchers into language and gender have shown a keener interest in the differences between men and women in the ways they communicate and interact than in the similarities between them, focusing on aspects such as style of language and speech. By highlighting some of the important aspects of cross-gender communication and language variation, the main objective of this paper is to suggest areas for more in-depth research in the future that could produce findings that may be useful for effective English language teaching. The paper is based on a review of relevant research in the area under consideration with the aim of providing a suitable theoretical framework for future research.

**Keywords:** phonological forms, conversational style, intonation, tag questions

## 1. Introduction

The idea that males and females speak differently has attracted the attention of researchers in psycholinguistics and linguists. Researchers have studied the ways in which men and women use different patterns of communication: for example, how males and females pronounce words, interrupt, pause, use vocabulary and ask questions. Many psychologists, sociolinguistics, anthropologists and other researchers into language and gender have been interested in the differences, rather than the similarities, between men and women. The term 'gender' does not simply mean biological sex but refers to everyday work and social interaction (Paltridge, 2012). According to Cameron (2005), gender is "not something a person has, but something that a person does" (p.49). Gender awareness is an important aspect of people's understanding of each other.

Singh (2001) suggests various reasons why studies on this subject are important. The first reason is concerned with their significance to psycholinguistics: it has been established that, in some language tasks, different parts of the male and female brain are activated for the same tasks. The second reason is their value to linguists and psycholinguists in general. For instance, understanding how male and female speakers use language assists the study of sociolinguistics and the creation of language acquisition models. Singh adds that such studies can help us to understand how language-disordered subjects are reformed. In many conversations between males and females, miscommunication or misunderstanding occurs because men and women use different conversational rules and infer meanings differently. In other words, they employ different linguistic patterns in their conversation. This might be because men and women have different aims for starting a conversation with others. With this in mind, Tannen (1990) argues that sorting out the differences in a conversational style can help people confront real conflicts of interest and find a shared language in which to negotiate them. There is a large body of evidence that the language of women is not always the same as that of men. Crawford (1995) noted that every empirical study of sex difference in language use cites the work of Robin Lakoff who began the search for the main features of women's speech. She published several articles in 1973, in addition to her well-known book, *Language and Women's Place*.

However, although the study of gender differences in conversational speech is important for many reasons, most studies in this field are not directly related to language production as in conversation (Singh, 2001). This article attempts to fill this gap by investigating theoretically two important aspects of sociolinguists' arguments and debates concerning the differences between men and women, as follows:

- a- Phonological forms, such as pronunciation, intonation, pitch and volume (e.g., Trudgill, 1972; Weiss 1970; Lakoff, 1975; Tahta, Wood & Loewenthal, 1981; Fishman, 1980; McConnell-Geinet, 1983; Elliot, 1995; Weatherall, 2002).
- b- Conversation style, in this paper, choice of vocabulary, the asking of questions, in particular tag questions, the use of interruption, and three ways of controlling a conversation are examined (e.g., Jespersen, 1922; Zimmerman & West, 1975; Beattie, 1982; Arise & Johnson, 1983; Coates, 1993; Herring, 1993; Tannen 1993; Bucholtz & Hall, 1995; Bonvillain, 2003; Goddard & Patterson, 2003; Kakava, 2006; Herring & Paolillo, 2006).

In general, the term 'sex' is used for biological categories, whereas 'gender' is used for social categories. In this article, the term 'gender' is used for the most part, without distinguishing between these aspects.

## 2. Differences in Phonetics

There is no doubt that the male voice is different from the female. It is easy for people to decide if a voice belongs to a woman or a man. There are various characteristics and features in male and female voices that distinguish them from each other, such as the pitch of voice and intonation. The majority of studies concerning language and gender have therefore been based on the analysis, observation, and transcription of spoken language. Trudgill's (1972) research into language and social class revealed some interesting differences between men and women. He made a detailed study based on phonetics in which subjects were grouped according to social class and sex. He asked them to speak in a variety of situations, before asking them to read a passage that contained words with which the speaker might use one or other of two speech sounds. He observed that the speaker used either the alveolar consonant /n/ or the velar consonant /ŋ/, the latter being considered the standard pronunciation. He found that women were more likely to use the prestigious pronunciation of certain speech sounds than were men. Moreover, in his study women scored lower than men, indicating that their pronunciation was closer to the standard than that of men. This led him to propose the concept of "covert prestige" to account for the fact that men use less standard pronunciation and less style-shifting towards the standard language than women.

In addition, the results of Adamson and Regan's study (1991) on the use of the *-ing* morpheme in English showed that the patterns of female L2 speakers were similar to those of native speakers, whereas the patterns of male L2 speakers were not. Fischer (1964) and Trudgill (1974) carried out their research on twenty-four children to investigate the different pronunciations of males and females of the variable (-ing). Both researchers found that (-ing) has two variants: the standard variant [ɪŋ] is considered to be the prestige variant and the non-standard variant [ɪn] is considered to be the stigmatized variant. Girls used the standard variant [ɪŋ] more frequently, whereas boys preferred to use the non-standard variant [ɪn]. Al-Harashah (2014) observed that women used urbanized pronunciation more than men to give them prestige and to give the impression of being educated and polite. Major (2004) mentioned that some L2 gender studies have confirmed the common belief that women have better pronunciation than men (e.g., Weiss 1970), while other researchers, such as Elliot (1995) and Tahta, Wood, and Loewenthal (1981), found no gender-based differences. After conducting detailed studies, they found that the differences between males and females in their use of standardized pronunciation were insignificant.

With regard to distinguishing between male and female voices, many studies have investigated how the pitch of the speaker's voice can help the listener to identify the gender of the speaker. Women's voices are higher pitched than those of men, who have larger larynxes, and longer and thicker vocal cords (Weatherall, 2002): "the greater mass and length of vocal cords lead to a slower frequency of vibration of the vocal cords and a lower pitch. Women tend to have higher-pitched voices than men because their vocal cords are shorter and thinner" (p.49). Eakins and Eakins (1978) also came to the conclusion that women have higher-pitched voices than men because their vocal cords are shorter and thinner than those of men. Lakoff (1975), on the other hand, argued that women's use of a higher pitch can sometimes be indicative of hesitancy, uncertainty and a lack of assertiveness. She claimed that women use a questioning intonation in declarative statements (raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement) to turn such statements into questions, thus expressing uncertainty. Other researchers (e.g., McConnell-Geinet, 1983 and Fishman, 1980) have agreed with Lakoff's view, but they have suggested that women use this behaviour in order to secure a particular response from the listener. McConnell-Ginet (1983) noted that women's use of this style can be interpreted as indicating emotionality and natural impulses, whereas men's use of narrow intonational ranges can be taken as evidence of control and restraint. Weatherall (2002) argues that males normally use a steady pitch, whereas women tend to change pitch and volume when, for example, communicating with children who are in need of emotional handling, or because they feel it necessary to make an effort to hold the listener's attention.

### 3. Differences in Conversational Styles

Various researchers have examined the differences in a conversational style between males and females from different perspectives. Herring (1993), for example, identified various characteristics of women's speech, including "attenuated" assertions, in contrast to men's speech, which was made up of "strong assertions, self-promotion, rhetorical questions, authoritative orientation, challenges and humor". Sax (2006), on the other hand, asked 272 teachers about their perspectives on the differences between boys and girls in their way of speaking. The teachers thought that boys inside the classroom spoke briefly and loudly using direct sentences and clear instructions such as "open your book" or "give me my pen" whereas girls usually spoke more softly and politely. In the field of sociolinguistics, Herring and Paolillo (2006) mention that some sociolinguists, such as Arise and Johnson (1983) and Coates (1989), identified the differences between the spoken interaction of males and females in terms of their preference for particular topics of conversation. They found that groups of females preferred talking about people and relationships, whereas males preferred to talk about objects, such as their cars, computers, or external events such as politics and sport.

Other researchers have identified differences between males and females in aspects of conversational style in addition to pronunciation. These aspects include interruption, speaker turn, paying attention, using controlling speech, choice of vocabulary and asking questions, with an emphasis on tag questions. Maltz and Borker (cited in Bonvillain, 2003, p.196) state that "women's tendencies are to ask questions, encourage responses from interlocutors, make minimal responses, and allow interruptions into their speaking turns; and men's tendencies are to interrupt, challenge, ignore the speech of interlocutors, introduce and control topics, and make direct assertions of fact and opinion". They found evidence that the differences between the speech of women and men are the outcome of training in various stages of their childhood, with girls seeking to create close, good quality relationships with each other, criticize other people acceptably and politely, and interpret the speech of others accurately and perfectly, while boys seek to assume positions of control in order to attract people's attention. In the following sections, the differences between men and women in their choice of vocabulary, the asking of questions with an emphasis on tag questions, the use of interruption, and some ways of controlling a conversation are discussed in detail.

#### 3.1 Choice of Vocabulary

Many researchers have discussed the differences between males and females in their choice of vocabulary. Weatherall (2002) has pointed to the fact that choice and frequency of use of adjectives are an indication of gender difference. For example, 'pretty' and 'emotional' words tend to be used by women and children, whereas 'strong' and 'tough' words tend to be used by men. Bonvillain (2003) has stated that men in the company of other men tend to use more profanity than women. They use swear words and other undesirable terms with greater frequency, whereas women refrain from using these words even in their casual conversations. They feel ashamed and embarrassed when they hear profane words. A woman makes an effort to use polite and 'nice' words that express sensitivity whereas a man often uses rude words that express heartlessness and harshness.

Lakoff (1975) and Deklerk (1992) suggested that women are different from men in some features of the lexicon. For example, women normally use more precise colour descriptions (e.g., mauve, beige and lavender) than men. They also found that women tend to react emotionally by using "empty adjectives" such as "wonderful" or "terrific", whereas men tend to react by giving specific information such as "adorable". By contrast, Bonvillain criticizes the notion of empty adjectives and claims that "adjectives such as 'lovely' are not empty or devoid of meaning" (2003, p.194). She thinks that the main difference between men and women in this regard is the stronger emotions women have compared with men.

There is also a view among researchers that men have a more extensive vocabulary than women. Coates (1993) mentioned that in the early twentieth century, Jespersen (1922) believed that the vocabulary of a woman, as a rule, is much less extensive than that of a man and supported his claim with data from an experiment by an American, Jastrow, in which male college students were found to use a greater variety of words than female college students when asked to write down a hundred (separate) words. Jastrow's subjects were male and female college students, so the women were obviously receiving an education. However, at that time, in many countries of the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, women did not receive an education, so this difference between the genders is unsurprising; men were able to use more new and fresh expressions than women. After the re-evaluation of women's rights, when they sought equal access to education, women were able to go to school and university to study and learn whatever they liked without any discrimination or bias. As a result, both women and men can now use new expressions and words based on their education.

### 3.2 Asking Questions

According to Holms (1995), women tend to ask more questions than men by introducing more topics to engage their partners and start different conversations. Lakoff (1975) claimed that women use more question forms than men because they are hesitant to use more definite statements. However, Goddard and Patterson (2003) argued that “asking questions is [then] seen not as some universal feature of ‘women’s language’, signalling uncertainty and powerlessness, but as part of the conversational labour women are often required to perform in their social role.” (p:99). Women ask more questions to ease the flow of conversation, while men use more interruption to control conversations (Reid, S. A.; Keerie, N. & Palomares, N. A., 2003). In addition, Mulac et al. (1998, cited in Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003) reported that men’s perception of questioning is different from that of women. Men almost certainly consider it as a sign of sensitivity, whereas women almost certainly consider it as a sign of insensitivity.

There is also a significant difference between men and women in their use of tag questions. Tag questions are described by Tannen (1990:228) as “statements with little questions added onto the end, as in ‘It’s a nice day, isn’t it?’” She notes that a tag question is an example of behaviour that can be interpreted differently depending on whether it is performed by a woman or a man. Lakoff (1975) studied sex differences in speech style with an emphasis on tag questions. She believes that features such as hesitations, intensifiers and qualifiers, tag questions and rising intonations on declarations are typical features of women’s speech that indicate weakness, unassertiveness and a lack of authority. Her explanation of this style was that women are socialized to hedge meanings, in order to avoid offending men. She has also pointed out that women use grammatical patterns more than men; for instance, tag questions are made up of a declarative sentence followed by a small question. Women use these in order to assert themselves and to make sure of something: for example, “Janet will visit me, won’t she?” According to Lakoff, women tend to use tag questions in a desire for confirmation and approval, which is an indication of a lack of self-confidence. Lakoff proposed that tag questions are used when a speaker is stating a claim but has limited confidence in the truth of the claim. She also believed that women use one particular type of tag question, which indicates uncertainty and a lack of conviction, more than men.

On the other hand, some researchers think that Lakoff’s claim that the use of tag questions is a sign of weakness, unassertiveness and a lack of authority is exaggerated and that the hypothesis needs more investigation and study in order to prove it. According to Goddard and Patterson (2003, p.97), ‘tag questions are complex items that can convey a range of different meanings where much depends on how they are said and the relationship between the interlocutors. For example, sentences such as ‘A nice day, isn’t it?’ are not an expression of uncertainty just because they are tag questions. They also mention that after the publication of Lakoff’s book, Dubois and Crouch (1975) carried out a new case study among academics, and found that men used tag questions more than women. Weatherall (2002) has also criticized Lakoff’s hypothesis that speakers (i.e., women) who use tag questions will be perceived as weak, unassertive and lacking in authority. Holmes (1984, cited in Weatherall, 2002) also challenged Lakoff’s hypothesis, conducting several studies on the issue of tag questions. He defined them as ‘affective tags’, which do not signal uncertainty but, rather, indicate concern for the addressee, or are used to encourage the addressee to take a turn at speaking.

From the above discussion, it appears that the findings regarding whether men or women use more tag questions in their speech are inconclusive. The use of this linguistic form may depend on the situation or the way in which it is used. It can be used to express tentativeness, concern, or have another function not stated in Holmes’ work.

### 3.3 Interruption

Most researchers interested in the relationship between language and gender define interruption as an instance in which one person initiates talk while another person is already talking. They think that the basic function of interruption is to prevent the first speaker from being able to finalize what he or she wants to say so that the second person can take the floor (Tannen 1993), and is, therefore, a sign of dominance. This has been discussed in detail by Tannen and other researchers. Kaplan and Farrell (1994) observed that women’s messages are quite short and that their participation is driven by their desire to keep the conversation going rather than by the desire to achieve consensus on particular issues. In addition, Zimmerman and West (cited in Coates, 1993) recorded thirty-one conversations in different locations, including university campuses and coffee shops. They employ two terms: *overlap* and *interruption*. Overlap in conversation means that a speaker begins to speak at the very end of the current speaker’s turn, whereas interruption is a violation of the turn-taking rules of conversation with the next speaker beginning to talk while the current speaker is still speaking so that the first speaker does not finish his or her speech. After recording the thirty-one conversations, they found that in mixed-sex conversations, most interruptions (98 percent, in fact) were produced by men and that the speaker who fell silent was usually a woman. Moreover, West (cited in Crawford, 1995) found that although women sometimes have a higher status in the conversational situation, their position does not necessarily protect them from

being interrupted. After studying 31 single-sex and mixed-sex conversations, Zimmerman and West (1975) therefore concluded that “females are a class of speakers whose rights to speak appear to be casually infringed on by males” (1975:125), and that interruption was a strategy used by male speakers to dominate, get their turn, control the speech and establish the topics that they wanted to talk about, regardless of the uncompleted previous topic. Their findings suggest that males use interruption more than females as a means of dominating and controlling interactions. Beattie (1982), on the other hand, questions this view: “Why do interruptions necessarily reflect dominance? Can interruptions not arise from other sources? Do some interruptions not reflect interest and involvement?” Zimmerman and West’s (1975) study have been criticized by many researchers for different reasons. Talbot (1992), for instance, described their methods as crude, and she claimed that their study had a political agenda. Moreover, she claimed that the data they collected was no longer available, which leaves them wide open to being discredited. She also stated that “just as men consistently violated women’s turns as speakers, women consistently avoided such violation of men’s turns, deferring to them” (p.453). Zimmerman and West’s (1975) study has also been criticized by other researchers, such as Murray and Covelli (1988), who conducted a study that used data from interviews, staff meetings and parties, and achieved precisely the opposite result. Their findings revealed that women are capable of interrupting men in many different situations, and they rejected the notion that there was any connection between interruptions and male dominance. Furthermore, James and Clarke (1993) reported that the majority of studies demonstrate that there are no significant differences between the genders in this respect and that both males and females are capable of interrupting other males and females. Nevertheless, James and Clarke found a limited amount of evidence that women sometimes use interruptions for the purposes of cooperation and the building of rapport.

According to Holmes (1995), the interruption can be defined as a disruptive turn. She argues that several studies, which are methodologically sound, confirm the notion that men disruptively interrupt others more than women do. Specifically, these studies demonstrate that men interrupt women more than women interrupt men. Holmes refers to two studies: one by West (1984) and the other by Woods (1989), which proved the tendency for men to interrupt women even in situations where women have a high status. West made a comparison between male and female doctors interacting with patients. She found that male doctors interrupted their patients far more than female doctors did, and that male patients interrupted their doctor more if she was female than they did when their doctor was male. Wood came to the same conclusion when he analysed conversations between work colleagues in Britain. This analysis showed female bosses being regularly interrupted by male subordinates, despite their higher status.

### 3.4 Controlling a Conversation

In this section, three ways of controlling a conversation: initiating topics, the use of silence, and the use of agreement and disagreement, are discussed. With regard to the initiation of topics, Al-Harashseh (2014) observes that women initiate more topics in order to maintain the conversation, which suggests that women dominate conversations more than men. Women not only initiate topics but also prefer to discuss personal topics in order to debate private issues (Hanafiyeh & Afghari, 2014; Rasekh & Saeb, 2015). By initiating such topics, women are able to direct a conversation in the way they want, thus dominating the conversation.

Another way of controlling a conversation is by using silence. Coates (1993) mentioned that silence is often a sign of a malfunction in a conversation which in men’s speech occurs as a result not only of interruptions and overlaps but also of delayed minimal responses such as *mhm* or *yeah* that men often use, which are an indicator of the listener’s positive attention to the speaker. Although silence can be used as a device for controlling an interaction, in which case it is a sign of power, force and self-confidence that motivates and stimulates another person to speak, it can also be an indication of powerlessness. In the field of psychoanalysis, Bucholtz and Hall (1995) pointed out that “traditional analysts use their own silence as a means of forcing patients to speak because silence is not heavily preferred in all Western cultures”.

The third way of controlling a conversation discussed here is the use of agreement or disagreement. As Kakava (2006) notes in his review of the book *Glossa – Genos- Fylo [in Greek: ‘Language- (grammatical) Gender- (Social) Gender]*, Marianthi Makri Tsilipakous’s chapter focuses on agreement and disagreement and the number of talk patterns females use in normal conversations compared with men. She recorded 60 males and females in their conversations with their friends and relatives. She found that women used up-graders to agree, whereas men used either repetition or down-graders. In the case of disagreement, on the other hand, she found that females accompanied their disagreements with qualifications and accounts, whereas males normally used inter-turn delays, not only in the form of silence but also in the form of insertion sequences. More recently, Guillier and Durdell (2007) examined students’ language use and interaction style in text-based and computer-mediated discussion groups. One of their findings was that males tended to express disagreement more than females, while females tended to express agreement more than males. They

supported their argument with the findings of Coates (1993) and Tannen (1991) that the male style is based on competitiveness, whereas the female style is based on cooperativeness. AI-Harashseh (2014) found that women tend to avoid direct disagreement more than men because the “goals of the interaction are solidarity stressing-maintaining good social relations” (Hohnes, 2008, p.309).

The discussion above has shown that researchers have identified various strategies used by men and women in conversation, including choosing specific vocabulary, asking tag questions, interrupting and controlling a conversation. The findings concerning the difference in motivation between men and women for using these strategies remain inconclusive, however. Further research in this area is therefore necessary.

#### 4. Conclusion

Psycholinguistics and linguists have shown that men and women use different patterns of communication. This paper has investigated the literature to highlight some of the reported differences between men and women in language use in terms of phonological forms and conversation styles. These have been discussed from the aspects of choice of vocabulary, asking questions, with an emphasis on tag questions, interruption, and ways of controlling a conversation.

With regard to the phonological aspect – that is, voice quality, there is a broad consensus that there is an obvious difference between men and women in this respect. This difference can be attributed to physiological and/or social factors. In addition to differences in voice quality, it has also been found that men and women tend to use particular phonetic forms differently. To be more specific, several studies have demonstrated that women tend to use prestigious phonetic forms which approximate the standard more often than men.

With regard to conversation style, the first aspect discussed in this article was the choice of vocabulary, including the notion that women choose to use empty adjectives, such as “lovely,” “very,” “wonderful” and “beautiful”, more than men (De Klerk, 1992; Weatherall, 2002). Early studies, such as that of Jespersen (1922), also revealed that the vocabulary of women was less extensive than that of men. In some countries, such as Middle Eastern countries, this might be a result of the unequal access to education for men and women at that time. The second aspect of the conversation investigated was asking questions. Several studies have revealed that women ask questions more than men by raising more topics to engage their partners, start a different conversation, perform their social role, or ease the flow of conversation (Lakoff, 1975; Holms, 1995; Goddard & Patterson, 2003; Reid et al. 2003). Along with the issue of asking questions, there has been a debate regarding the use of tag questions. Lakoff proposed that tag questions are used when a speaker is stating a claim but has limited confidence in the truth of the claim. She claimed that women use tag questions more than men and that it is an indication of uncertainty and a lack of conviction. However, Dubois and Crouch (1975) carried out a case study among academics and found that men used tag questions more than women. The findings with regard to who use tag questions more frequently – men or women - therefore remain inconclusive. It has been established that the purpose of a tag question usually depends on the situation or the way in which it is used rather than on the gender of the user. The third aspect of conversation examined in the article was the use of interruption. There appears to be a tendency for men to interrupt more than women as a means of dominating, getting their turn, and controlling the interaction (Zimmerman & West, 1975; Tannen, 1993). Finally, three ways of controlling a conversation were discussed: the initiation of topics, the use of silence, and the use of agreement and disagreement, and differences between men and women in these aspects were examined.

Owing to limitations of space, this article has covered only a selection of conversational aspects in which men and women differ. Future articles could investigate other aspects: for instance, by making a comparison between two social contexts (a Middle Eastern and a Western country, for example), and the effect of the social differences on language use.

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