

An Investigation into Differences between Women's and Men's Speech

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1 Introduction

This essay will examine and discuss gender differences in language using a recording of a conversation recorded by the writer. The essay shall begin by detailing the background of research within this area. It will then move on to analyse the recording, considering comparisons that can be made between the research carried out here and previous studies in the field. This will also include a discussion of relevant issues which arise from the analysis of this research.

1.1 Language and Gender - A Brief History.

Within our culture there remain deep rooted beliefs about how men and women behave and are supposed to behave. A major part of this is based upon how we speak, and has developed into the field of 'folklinguistics'. These beliefs are illustrated by the large number of etiquette books which were popular around the turn of the twentieth century. Books such as 'The Woman's Book: Contains Everything a Woman Ought to Know.' (Jack and Strauss 1911) clearly show how people thought women were expected to behave. When examining these books it is clear that the aim of such books is to influence women's behaviour, as "*male behaviour has traditionally been seen as the norm and in need of no particular advice or attention.*" (Goddard & Patterson 2000:49) This belief that women are in some way abnormal and inferior in their behaviour, and more importantly for this essay speech style, was given further weight by early analyses of male and female speech differences by writers such as Jespersen (1922) who wrote that women are more refined in their speech, use less coarse and gross expressions, are uninventive, and were men forced

to be restricted to women's speech style would quickly be reduced to a state of boredom due to the nature of women's conversation. (Jespersen 1922) These views clearly illustrate how women are seen as being linguistically deficient in comparison to men.

Gradually over the course of the twentieth century, due in part for example to women's role in the war effort, opinions of women began to change, culminating in the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies. This led to a reexamination of women's language and a discussion of the inequality in views such as these. Leading also to a discussion of the power relationships at work in speech.

These views of women as being somehow 'abnormal' or 'inferior' in their style of speech were changed, as researchers began to examine language in detail and the inequalities within it. Lakoff's (1975) seminal paper in the field, though based mainly on observations of language, discussed the differences between women and men's language, seeing them as differences, not abnormalities. These observations led to a series of papers which set out to examine these claims. This became in part a discussion of male dominance over women as to a certain extent folklinguistics' beliefs were confounded as men were discovered to talk more than women and dominate conversations in a series of ways, such as:

“interruptions (Zimmerman and West 1975; Eakins and Eakins 1976; West & Zimmerman 1983; West 1984) and simply to talk more than women (Swacker 1975; Eakins and Eakins 1976) In mixed-sex conversations it has been found that men's topics are more often pursued, while women play a 'supportive' role (Fishman 1978,

1983, *Leet-Pellegrini 1980*)” (Swann J. in Coates and Cameron 1989: 123)

Women and men’s conversation was seen to mirror that of other relationships in society, such as the relationship between parent and child, (West and Zimmerman 1977) and doctor and patient. (West 1984) With men’s style being compared in most cases to that of the powerful person in these relationships.

There were also a large number of pieces of research into differences in the grammatical structures women and men use, as the traditional belief that women are more polite than men, (Brown 1980) use fewer vulgar terms (Gomm 1981) and language closer to Standard English were examined. (Milroy and Margrain 1980, Cheshire 1982)

As can be seen from the dates of these studies a great amount of important work was carried out in the seventies and early eighties. Since then it has fallen to commentators such as Tannen (1990) to continue pushing this discussion forward, moving on from the simple issue of male dominance, to examine in greater detail the different style of speaker, irrespective of their gender, and also to examine the reactions of each gender, and what they expected of themselves, both as a speaker and the addressee.

Within Section 2 of this essay, a number of those studies already mentioned will be used to assist in the analysis of the data created for this essay, as the evidence is examined and the implications discussed.

1.2 Methodology

In order to investigate gender and speech, a conversation was recorded so that this could be transcribed and analysed to provide data from which these issues could be discussed.

The conversation involved two men and two women, all of whom work for the same long-established English Language School in Tokyo. The recording took place with the full knowledge of all participants, and took place in the familiar surroundings of the teacher's room during working hours. While it would have been preferable to make the recording without the participant's knowledge, due to the desire to record 'natural conversation', this was practically impossible due to the recording equipment available, whilst also being ethically questionable. The participants were not told the reasons for the research, only that they were taking part in a piece of research for this course. Following the conversation all participants were given a confidential questionnaire to fill in, and were interviewed in an attempt to discover their general feelings about the conversation. This was done to gain an understanding of both the style of speech, and perceptions of how those involved spoke.

The recording took place over a period of an hour, and for the purpose of this essay a twenty minute extract was transcribed and analysed, which forms the basis of the following sections of this essay.

With such a small number of participants in the research, comparisons between this and other research are very difficult, but by having more than one person from each sex it makes analysis and comparisons easier. Any group larger than four would have

proved incredibly difficult to transcribe and a two person conversation would have been purely an analysis of the conversational style of the two individuals involved. This four person conversation also allowed for the analysis of differences when people spoke to a member of the same and the opposite sex.

The participants:

Name	Age	Nationality	Responsibilities and Experience
Male 1 (M1)	29	British	Five years teaching / Three years in the Company / Ex-Assistant Head Teacher / Now P/T Regular Teacher.
Female 1 (F1)	29	Australian	Eighteen months in the company / Head of Kids
Female 2 (F2)	26	American	Twelve months in the company / Assistant Head Teacher.
Male 2 (M2)	26	New Zealander	Five months in the company / Regular Teacher.

Examining the profiles of the four members of the group, it is clear that M1, F1 and F2 are clearly senior in power within the school to M2, due to all of them being or having been in a senior position in the company. Also, having known each other for longer it might be expected that these three members are more comfortable in each others company, and therefore could be more dominant than M2. Due to these reasons, it would be safe to assume that M2 would be expected to show signs in his speech of this position of less power.

2 Analysis

The analysis of the transcription has been divided into 4 sections: conversational dominance, swearing and vulgar language, verbosity, and assertive and tentative speech styles.

2.1 Conversational Dominance

One of the major differences in women and men's speech is that men have been found to dominate conversations through the use of interruptions and overlaps, and that the amount of these conversational irregularities that took place rose significantly when men were talking to women.

Zimmerman and West (1975) found that in conversations involving eleven mixed-sex pairs men interrupted or overlapped their female counterparts a total of fifty-five times, but were interrupted or overlapped themselves only twice. In comparison, conversations involving single sex pairs produced significantly fewer interruptions and overlaps by men on men. It was also found that women are much more likely to interrupt their own sex. Illustrating how "*women are concerned not to violate the man's turn but to wait until he has finished.*" (Coates 1986: 100)

By violating the speakers turn in this way, there is the effect that "*after overlaps and especially after interruptions, speakers tend to fall silent. Since most interruptions (according to Zimmerman and West's data) are produced by men in mixed-sex conversations, the speaker who falls silent is usually a woman.*" (ibid 1986: 100)

In order to allow for comparisons between previous studies and this analysis, Zimmerman and West's (1975) original definitions of conversational irregularities were used. Those being:

Overlaps are instances of slight over-anticipation by the next speaker: instead of beginning to speak immediately following current speakers' turn, next speaker begins to speak at the very end of current speakers' turn, overlapping the last word (or part of it). Interruptions, on the other hand, are violations of the turn-taking rules of conversation. Next speaker begins to speak while current speaker is still speaking, at a point in current speaker's turn which could not be defined as the last word."
(Coates 1986: 99)

When examining the conversation recorded here, it is clear that the number of interruptions and overlaps by men was clearly higher than those by women. (See Figure 1 in Appendix I.) However when you look carefully at the results you see that the men's results were strongly influenced by M2's conversational style, which continually broke the norms of turn taking by interrupting. (See figure 2 in Appendix I) M2 strongly conforms to the norms of male speech as illustrated by Zimmerman and West as he continually interrupts the other speakers. Much more so than all the other speakers including the other male, M1, who while not interrupting as much as M2, does so more than the women in the study. This is in complete contrast to the assumptions made by myself prior to the research that M2 would dominate less than the other participants. (See Section 1.2) This difference could be due to M2 having a more confrontational style of speech than the others, or it could be that he is compensating for his lack of authority in the group, by adjusting his conversational

style. This substantial difference in the results between M2 and the other participants highlights the difficulties in analysing such a small research group, as we do not know whether M2's results are the norm for men or not. Yet the huge difference between M2 and the women in the group, and the fact that M1 interrupted more than the women does point to men's attempts to dominate the conversation through interruption.

A further significant point is when you consider who was interrupted. Figure 3 in Appendix I illustrates how women are more likely than men to be interrupted, especially by members of the opposite sex. This table clearly shows that while it was the men who were breaking the rules, they were doing so by interrupting the women in the group far more than they were interrupting each other. A further significant point is that within the transcript there was not a single instance of a man being interrupted or overlapped by women, strongly mirroring Zimmerman and West's (1975) study which found that men are more likely to interrupt women and women are reluctant to interrupt men. In discussing Zimmerman and West's research findings, Coates (1986) states that the result of being interrupted is that the first speaker lapses into a period of silence. With the women in the group being interrupted far more than the men, it therefore follows that within this conversation the men would speak more than the women involved. This question of verbosity, will be addressed in the section 2.3.

Added to this example of male dominance are a number of other significant examples throughout the recording. Due to the nature of the four person conversation there are a number of instances where two people begin to speak at the same time, and often

two conversations would begin. The three times this happened they always developed into male/male and female/female conversations. It is of significance that each time this occurred it was the male conversation which continued when the separate conversations ended and reverted to all four people being involved in the one conversation. This is illustrated by the following extract:

F2: What vegetables?

M1: Vegetables, bloody expensive vegetables F2: Yeah, but when you see the

M2: Ridiculously expensive, I've hardly vegetables, they're always like

Eaten any vegetables since I've

Been here

Too bloody expensive

M1: Yeah

F2: You've got to start going to the lunch specials with the salads.

A more startling example of this flexibility by the women involved, and their willingness to accommodate the manner in which their male counterparts ignore them is reproduced below. In this instance M2 begins by interrupting F1, without any consideration for her, as she is in the middle of a sentence. He continues to speak raising his voice louder and louder until both F1 and F2 have been silenced. This is despite F1 and F2 showing their feelings about being interrupted, by attempting to continue their conversation. M1 is unrelenting while they try to continue, and they finally concede to him. Perhaps the most significant part of this extract is that having finally given up, they do not in anyway challenge his rule breaking, but instead illustrate their approval of it by laughing at his comments.

F1: Well I can imagine that about boys cos they live at home and they don't have to do any cooking.

F2: But you do have to, you have to go M2: I just don't understand, what has he been

to the supermarket occasionally thinking, doing just putting all this stuff in

F1: Yeah, but they don't do any cooking my mouth for a few years now, I wonder what's in it, natural curiosity, it's like so bizarre.

F2: F1: Ha ha ha.

This total disregard for the previous speakers turn is typical of M2's speech and to a lesser extent M1's. The women analysed appear to be more aware of the norms of conversational turn-taking, illustrated by this example below where F1 begins to speak at a point believes is the end of F2's turn. F2 however continues to speak, due to her own belief that her turn has not yet finished, F1 pauses and waits for F2 to finish her turn before re-starting.

F2: Yeah buy one less vodka at night and buy vegetables in the day ha ha.

F1: Everything

F1: Everything is expensive in Japan.

This willingness to pause and wait for the first speaker to finish their turn, even when it appeared that the first speaker had finished, is a feature of conversational style lacking in both of the men in this study and illustrates the lack of a desire to dominate

the conversation by the women, and more of a willingness to listen.

Speaker awareness is also evident when you consider the work of Kalcik (1975), who discussed a different style of interruption to that defined by Zimmerman and West (1975) Kalcik defined an additional style of interruption, where a second speaker supported the conversational topic of the first speaker by finishing the idea. (Kalcik 1975, from Swann in Cameron and Coates 1989:126) An example of this supportive style is found below, and it is significant because within the transcript it was the female participants who used this style of interruption, and the male participants who were more likely to use the violation style.

Example 1

F2: I know could we have

F1 : Some good looking ones

Example 2

F2: I doubt it, I can't imagine them

F1: I doubt it

It is clear that there is a difference in the amount of use of interruptions by men and women, with men being more likely to interrupt and less likely to be interrupted. Due to the size of the study and the way in which one participant (M2) differs greatly to the rest, it is impossible to state that this is entirely due to gender differences, yet the fact that the women involved only interrupted each other, and not the men shows a reluctance on the women's part to interrupt men, and a predisposition by the men to interrupt women more than men.

2.2 Swearing and Vulgar Language

A traditional belief about the differences between men and women is the use of swearing and vulgar language. Illustrated by the prevalence of phrases such as ‘ladylike’ behaviour, or ‘swearing like a trooper’ which point to the beliefs that swearing is a habit purely for men. A number of assertions have been made about female and male speech styles in this area. It was claimed by Jespersen (1922) that women have an instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and a preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions. Flexner (1960) claimed that “*most American slang is created and used by males.*” (Flexner 1960: xii). Also Lakoff (1975) claimed that while men use stronger expletives, women use politer versions such as ‘damn’ and ‘oh dear’. (Coates 1986: 108)

From my own analysis it appears that in part this belief holds out to be true. As eighty per cent of the vulgar terms in the transcript, are uttered by the men. (See Figure 4 in Appendix I) While conforming to the norms, this is remarkable because of the responses to the questionnaire. F2 felt that she swore most in the group, and much more than usual, whilst also feeling that F1 swore more than both of the men. This is clearly not the case, as F1 did not swear once in the twenty minute section analysed. With this comment by F2 in mind, the whole conversation was checked for further use of vulgar terms, and it is very interesting to find that F1 does not swear at all. (See Figure 5 in Appendix I) This leads me to conclude that F2 takes little or no notice when men swear, as she possibly believes that the use of vulgar terms by men is normal within conversation. However should a woman swear it is not considered to

be the norm, and is therefore more noteworthy. This is clearly a possible reason why F2 felt that F1 swore a lot in the conversation, when in reality she didn't.

Another possibility could be her understanding of the phrase 'vulgar language'. Examining Figure 6 in Appendix I, you can see the vulgar terms used by all participants. It is clear that F2 uses the relatively more vulgar terms. F2's answer in the questionnaire could simply be due to a different perception of a 'vulgar term'. Terms used by M1, which while classed as 'vulgar' by myself, might be inoffensive to F2.

2.3 Verbosity

The question of who talks more has been a long-standing area of discussion. Tannen (1990) examined conversations between married couples and discussed at length the stereotypes of the wife who 'never stops talking' and the husband who comes home from work and barely utters a word about his day to his wife. Phrases such as 'She never stops talking' and 'He never talks to me about work' being typical of responses.

Compared with this, is research carried out which found huge differences in amounts of speech when given a picture to discuss, with men talking much more than the women involved. (Swacker 1975) Tannen (1990) also commented on this talkativeness of men when she heard comments by wives who expressed their disappointment when their husbands told interesting stories about their day at work to friends, after remarking on their arrival home that 'nothing much had happened

today.’ It appears from this research that men in fact talk more than women, but do so to friends, rather than their partners. Yet the perception of the chatty woman persists due to our socialization, which distorts our views of how much a certain person speaks. This view is justified by my research which showed that F1 spoke least of all participants, (see figure 7 in Appendix I) yet was perceived by all involved to have spoken either the most, or second most in the group. Whilst M1, who was perceived to have spoken the least by two people and second most by one person, had in fact spoken the most.

One possible reason for this impression that F1 spoke more than the others, is the different style of speech used by men and women. Examining the transcript in more detail it is clear that the women involved employed a greater amount of active listening devices (mmm, yeah, etc.) than the men, (See Figure 8 in Appendix I) with F1 using by far the most. (See Figure 9 in Appendix I) The use of these features may have led the other participants to believe that she was talking more, because her involvement in the conversation increased, as can be seen by an examination of the number of turns taken by each participant. (See Figure 10 in Appendix I)

It is significant that M2 uses the least amount of active listening devices, further illustrating his conformity to the characteristics of male speech. A further fact of note is that M2 spoke less than both F2 and M1. This appears in contrast to the findings of Section 2.1, where M2’s high amount of interruptions, were thought to lead to him talking more than those he interrupted. This is possibly due to the topics of the conversation. M2’s length of time in the school led to his inability to discuss subjects such as previous students, a topic discussed at some length and in his questionnaire,

M2 mentions this, stating that he felt marginalised at times in the conversation. The amount spoken by M2 is very similar to that of F1, yet F1 does not mention this feeling of being left out. A significant point as it possibly portrays the male feeling that they have the right to speak at all times. A point further illustrated by M1's belief that he spoke the least, when in reality he spoke the most.

In conclusion to this section it is clear that perceptions of how we speak and how much we do speak are very different, and that it appears that the men in this study felt that they had more of a right to speak than the women involved.

2.4 Assertive and Tentative Speech Styles.

A further common belief about language is that women are more tentative in their speech. Lakoff (1975) highlighted the use of the 'tag question' as an illustration of this. Claiming that women use more tag questions than men, who in turn by using them less appear to be more assertive. Further research found that tag questions were more commonly associated with women's language (Siegler and Siegler 1976), illustrating people's attitudes towards women's speech and its tentativeness. The study carried out for this essay however, found very different results with men using tag questions more than the women. (See Figure 11 in Appendix I) What is interesting about this is that none of the tag questions are uttered by M2, who was assessed as the more dominating person, due to his excessive use of interruptions. This is perhaps significant as the more aggressive style of speech employed by M2 could also lead to his being more assertive in his speech. However, this can not be said to be related to gender, as M1 used the most tag questions in the group.

Another form of language which has been identified as being tentative speech is the use of hedges, for example, sort of, kind of, etc. Lakoff (1975) described them as a feature of women's language which makes their language less direct. Within this study it was found that the women involved did in fact use hedges more than the men. (See figure 12 in Appendix I) Again in the case of M2 there was a significant difference between his number of hedges used and either of the two women in the study.

Considering both these points of tag questions and the use of hedges, it would be easy to surmise that of the four participants in the study it is M2 who is the least assertive in his use of language, with all other three being almost similar in their use of these language features. Due to the size of the study it is impossible to say whether these differences are due to gender. They could simply be linked to other factors such as M2's nationality. Yet the fact that the results are similar to those found previously in other studies, does hint at the possibility that these differences are gender related.

3 Conclusion

This study has attempted to examine the differences between female and male language, and while generalisations from such a small research group are impossible, it does point to the fact that in certain areas conversation styles differ greatly. To say whether this is a question of gender or simple differences in conversational style would require much more research. However, within this group: both men interrupted the most, and both women were interrupted the most; a woman used the most active

listening devices, and a man used the least; a man spoke the most, and a woman spoke the least; both women used more hedges which signify tentative speech; and both men used more vulgar terms. These basic facts show that while there are many factors which could have and did influence this research, such as nationality, length of relationship, seniority in the company, and not least that the researcher is a man. It does appear that a number of the research findings from twenty and thirty years ago, still hold true today.

These findings are remarkable when you consider that all those involved have grown up in a society very different from that of twenty and thirty years ago. The concepts of sexual equality and women's rights are not new, and the reaction of those involved to the results of this research, illustrate their awareness and desire to be equal.

From my analysis it is clear that the women involved are willing to illustrate their dissatisfaction at being interrupted.

Example 1

F1: I just went around

M2: Who with?

F1: Heh?

M2: Who with?

F1: Just me

Example 2

M1: Dunno. D'you know?

F2: Excuse me?

Also they are aware of the differences between men's and women's speech, illustrated by F1's comments in her questionnaire: "*men tend to talk over women*" (See Appendix III page 48 in this essay). Therefore it seems strange that the differences evident from my research persist. Tannen (1990) sees this difference as being linked to our socialization, with women being brought up to work with others, while men are taught to be competitive. This difference in perspective is particularly evident in Section 2.1 as the men compete to speak through the use of interruptions, compared with the more considerate conversational style of the women. Therefore if change is desired then awareness of these differences must be heightened and the socialization process changed, as it appears from this research that men retain a dominant style of speech.

Appendix I Tables.

Figure 1. Number of Instances of Interruptions and Overlaps by Women and Men

	Men	Women
Interruptions	19	3
Overlaps	8	2

Figure 2. Number of Instances of Interruptions and Overlaps by Individuals.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Interruptions	16	3	1	2
Overlaps	5	3	1	1

Figure 3. Number of Instances of a person Being Interrupted or Overlapped.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Was Interrupted	0	1	9	8
Was Overlapped	1	1	5	4

Figure 4. Number of Instances of Vulgar Terms Used.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Swear Words and Vulgar Terms	4	4	1	0

Figure 5 Number of Instances of Vulgar Terms Used in Entire Conversation.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Swear Words and Vulgar Terms	4	6	2	0

Figure 6. Vulgar Terms Used During the Conversation.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Transcribed Section	Bloody	Shit	Fuck	
	Shit	Bloody		
	Shit	Pissed		
	Shit	Shit		
Entire Conversation		Knackered Knackered	Mother fucker	

Figure 7. Number of Words Uttered During in the Transcription.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Number of Words	625	750	742	615

Figure 8. Number of Active Listening Devices.

	Men	Women
Number of Active Listening Devices	27	44

Figure 9. Number of Individual Active Listening Devices.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Number of Active Listening Utterances	9	18	34	10

Figure 10. Number of Turns Taken.

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Number of Turns Taken	83	96	101	105

Figure 11. Number of Tag Questions Used

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Number of Tag Questions	0	6	3	1

Figure 12 Number of Hedges Used

	M2	M1	F2	F1
Number of Hedges	3	7	9	10

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