# Module 10: Language and Gender

## Before you read

Take a few minutes to read the two conversations that appear in pages 187-188 of Ahearn’s textbook. Can you identify the gender of the speakers in each conversation? Why or why not? Gender is an extremely important part of human identity. Maybe you’ve heard people say that women are more talkative than men, or that men are more competitive in their speech than women. In this module, we’ll learn about some myths and realities of male and female speech. First, on the online component of our course, we’ll discuss the **socially constructed nature of gender**, and how this construction translates into real and perceived differences in male and female speech. In the f2f component of our class, we will build on this knowledge to discuss the supplemental readings and to consider the ways in which other concepts we have learned so far such as **communities of practice**, **indexicality**, and **language ideologies** can be used to better understand the ways in which **language** and **gender** intersect and interact.

Remember, words that are **bolded** may appear in quizzes or exams!

## Focus points

As you read, pay special attention to the following themes, concepts and theories.

* The difference between **sex** and **gender.**
* The **Four Characteristics** of gender
* The concept of **markedness** in grammar.
* **Janet Hyde’s** analysis of gender-variability in male and female communicative behavior.
* **Don Kulick’s** analysis of **female and male speech patterns** and their associated **language ideologies** (WARNING: this chapter contains foul language).
* Other **cross-cultural examples** of gendered differences in speech.

## The Difference Between Gender and Sex

The easiest way to conceptualize the difference between **gender** and **sex** is that **sex** corresponds to the biological existence of **female**, **male**, or **ambiguous genitalia** and that **gender** refers to a person’s **cultural** or **social identity** as either a **man** or a **woman** (or, in some societies, a **third gender**). Ahearn points out, however, that even our drive to classify sex as either female or male is driven by a culturally constructed **dichotomous gender ideology**. This need to assign people to **either** male or female sex is exemplified by the fact that people who are born **inter-sexed** are usually assigned to one sex or another, often with early surgical intervention. Thus, **both** sex **and** gender are concepts that are influenced by cultural and social norms and practices.

## Four Characteristics of Gender

### Gender is Learned

 Can you tell what gender this baby is?

One of the first questions expecting parents are asked about their babies is if they know if their child is a boy or a girl. Gender is something that is socialized from birth. Girls tend to be dressed in pink….



Whereas boys are often dressed in blue.



However, other than their physiological sex, there is nothing about a baby that marks it as inherently male or female. From the very beginning, parents –consciously and unconsciously—are engaged in a process of “gendering” their child: teaching him or her from birth the appropriate behavior associated with his or her sex. Recently, news about parents in [Sweden](http://www.thelocal.se/20232/20090623/) and [Canada](http://www.parentdish.com/2011/05/26/genderless-baby/?icid=main%7Chp-laptop%7Cdl1%7Csec1_lnk3%7C214338) who decided not to disclose their babies’ gender sparked controversy; gender is an intricate part of our identity, something we might have a difficult time imagining ourselves without. However, the sets of behaviors that are associated with being male, female, or (in some cultures) a third gender is **learned**: this is why what is considered feminine behavior in one place is associated with men in another (see, for instance, **Kulick’s example of aggressiveness as female characteristics in Samoa**).

### Gender is Collaborative

Gender, like other aspects of identity like race and ethnicity, is a **joint accomplishment**. It isn’t something that is constructed by one person or social group and then imposed on society: gender is constructed in and through **interactions** between members of society.

Look at the image displayed below.

This is a classic representation of domesticity in the 1950s. What kinds of ideologies, values, and ideas about gender are conveyed by this image? In what ways do you think these ideas were the result of both **male** and **female** beliefs about the roles of men and women in society?

If gender is **collaboratively constructed**, that also means that in many ways, gender and **“gender ideologies”** are in a process of constant change.



Credit: Magazine illustration, 1954 (colour litho) by English School, (20th century)

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### Gender is Performative

Gender is something we **do**, not something we **have.** In Module 8, we learned about Judith Butler’s use of performativity to think about gender as an identity that is continuously reinforced and reconstructed. This idea is particularly fruitful if we think about gender as collaborative and learned: if we **learn how to “be”** male or female, and we also take an active role in **defining** what it means to be male or female through **our social interactions**, it stands to reason that we make **choices** about how we dress, speak, and act –even if those choices are **constrained** by what we’ve **learned** through our social **interactions**.

These first three characteristics of gender allow for a great degree of **flexibility** in how gender is constructed. However, this flexibility is constrained and in many ways defined by the fourth characteristic of gender: **power asymmetries** are embedded within it.

### Gender Involves Asymmetry

**Inequality is built into gender**. Even in societies where gender equality is valued, very often these expressed beliefs do not translate into gender equality in terms of pay, work opportunities, or societal expectations (for example, in the United States women still earn on average 30% less than men). Moreover, there are multiple femininities and masculinities within a single culture and generation --maybe your ideas about what a “real man” is like differ substantially from those of your grandfather; likewise, the expectations of an average UCF female student about her career, when and whether she would like to marry, and when and whether she wants to have children some day are possibly quite different from the expectations that a young Amish woman might have about those very same issues.

## Do men and women talk differently?

There is a veritable industry out there built on the idea that conflicts between men and women boil down to differences in communication styles. This truism is part of our own popular culture and has made into books, movies, and [stand-up comedy](http://youtu.be/mxk963cNLvo).

Take some time and carefully read pages 195-207. Then, read the selection from Deborah Cameron’s book. In what ways are differences between male and female speech a part of American cultural **language ideologies** about gender and language rather than any kind of social reality?

## Gendered Language: Cross-Cultural Examples

Without a doubt, men and women really **do** speak differently in many cultures. Below are some examples of cross-cultural differences in male and female speech.

* Madagascar: women are thought to be direct and confrontational in their speech, men are thought to be indirect and discrete.
* Papua New Guinea: women engage in *kros*, an angry, obscene shouting match, because they are less capable of controlling their *hed* than men. Men are taught to suppress and conceal their anger.
* Japanese “women’s speech” is not readily learned, used, or recognized by Japanese women in everyday speech, though it remains a feminine ideal (***indexical inversion***: the social construction of women’s speech actively constructs the active reality that it claims to be representing).