



Unit 10 Language and Gender

Before we begin – some notes on the term ‘gender’

- ‘Gender’ in Unit 10 is used to mean biological sex.
- Due time restrictions, no in-class discussion of the broader notion of gender, anti-essentialist approaches to gender, and gender ‘performance’.
- See the textbook (pages 393-397) for overviews of the third gender hijra community in India, and the language patterns of other non-binary speakers in the USA and Tahiti.
- Restricted scope of the unit: an introduction to common/stereotypical male and female patterns of speech.

Two kinds of differences

- [1] Qualitative ‘sex-exclusive’ differences
 - Some patterns of speech are only used by either male or female speakers.
- [2] Quantitative ‘sex-preferential’ differences
 - Certain patterns occur in both male and female speech, but are used more often by speakers from one sex.

Qualitative/sex-exclusive differences

- the **Carib** people (Caribbean) – only women use words from another tribe – the Arawak
- **Karaja** women’s words have extra sounds
- **Zulu** women – sound taboos – avoid sounds in male relatives’ names
 - e.g Husband’s name is Mandla, then the wife should avoid using syllables “man” and “dla” in all words

- Similar patterns reported in **Hindi** and other languages

Lexical (word) differences

- Pronouns in **Japanese** and **Thai**
 - Special forms for 'I' and 'me' - dichan (Thai) / atashi (Japanese) for female speaker
- **Korean** family terms

	Male Speaker	Female Speaker
Older brother	Hyong	Oppa
Older sister	nuna	onni

- **Chinese**: special words for 'to marry' may be different for male/female speakers.
 - 娶 / 嫁
- Certain adjectives in **English** are/were used almost exclusively by females:
 - mauve, aquamarine, magenta, lavender
 - adorable, divine, charming, exquisite
- Compliments in English expressed differently:
 - 'What a nice shirt!'
 - 'Great car.'

Voice Pitch Differences

- Average male and female voice pitch levels are not the same in different societies.
 - Males typically have lower pitch than females.
- But both low and high pitch may be deliberately exaggerated.
 - Pre-pubescent males in the USA + UK often use an exaggerated low pitch.
 - Female speakers in Japan may use a higher-than-average pitch.
- low pitch = 'masculine'
- high pitch = 'feminine' (in some societies)

- Example: deliberate creation of low pitch in a female speaker
 - Margaret Thatcher, first female Prime minister of British
 - Used an average high pitch before she was elected
 - Switch to a deliberately low pitch followed by suggestions

Quantitative/sex-preferential differences in male/female speech

- Men and women may use **different quantities** of the **same** special forms.
 - In English, male speakers do more:
 - Reduction of '-ing' to '-in'
 - Double negation

Common cross-linguistic observation

- **Female speech often contains more standard forms.**
- Statistically, female speech contains more forms which are commonly considered:
 - higher in style
 - grammatically 'more correct'
 - (sometimes) historically older forms (e.g. the Chukchi in Siberia, Koasati in N. America)

Male and female speech matched against socio-economic level



- M and F speech in the Lower Working class is the same
- M and F speech in the Upper class is the same
- F speech in all other classes/socio-economic levels seems to be like M speech in the next higher class/level

Two theories of M/F speech differences

Theory I: Peter Trudgill (1970s)

- In the Lower Working class and Upper Class, **solidarity** causes men and women to speak the same.
- Elsewhere: Female speakers avoid forms which are considered low(er)-status (non-standard or “incorrect” forms).
- Female speakers favor forms which are considered prestigious and of high(er) status.

⇒ Use of higher status forms may be due to different **pressures** experienced by women vs. men in society.

- Men can achieve social prestige via high-level advancement in professions.
- Women may have unequal access to higher levels of employment.
- Other means are used to claim prestige such as language and dresses.

Trudgill identifies four different kinds of social pressure on women and their behavior.

(1) Social status (shared by men and women)

- Standard speech forms are associated with higher education and higher social status.
- The use of more prestige forms by women is suggested to be a way of projecting higher social status – sounding educated and successful.

(2) Women’s expected function as role models in society

- Society often expects ‘better’ behavior from women than from men.
- ‘Rule-breaking’ by females is often criticized more heavily than bad conduct by males.
- Women are the primary educators of the young, and so are expected to be models of ‘correct’ behavior, and to speak ‘more correctly’ than men.
- Expected to avoid non-standard language forms.

(3) Differences in power between men and women

- In many societies there is a power imbalance between men and women.

- People in subordinate roles in life are assumed to have to be polite to those with more power – employees to bosses, soldiers to officers.
- Many traditional societies are male-dominated.
- Women are expected to speak carefully and correctly as a sign of politeness and deference.

(4) Masculinity is communicated by non-standard speech

- Experiments show that non-standard speech is associated with masculinity and ‘toughness’
- If women do not want to be regarded as masculine/tough, they may aim to avoid non-standard forms of speech.

Different ‘pressures’ on male speech

- Pressure on men in lower socio-economic groups: project a masculine image and show solidarity with others from your own background.
 - ‘Working-class’, non-standard speech is valued as it helps fulfil these identity goals.
 - The prestige value of non-standard, vernacular forms is referred to as ‘**covert prestige**’ because people often do not say that they find non-standard speech better.
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Self-evaluation of speech

- Research surveys have asked people to evaluate their own speech to find out how they **believe** themselves to be speaking.
- Often there are **differences** between what people actually say and the way they think they talk.

The Results (tests in Norwich, UK)

- **40%** of people reported that they spoke in a **more colloquial** way with more non-standard forms than they actually did.

‘**Under-reporting**’ speech = claiming to use less prestigious forms than one actually does.

- Most of the under-reporters were **male**.

‘Over-reporting’

- 20% of people **‘over-reported’** themselves, claiming they spoke with more statusful forms than they did.
- Almost all of the over-reporters were **female**.
- Trudgill: Female speakers value more standard, prestige forms and would like to believe they commonly produce such forms.

The generalizations

- Trudgill: Both men and women claim they use the forms which have favorable associations for them.
- Many men seem to prefer covertly prestigious non-standard speech.
- Many women appear to favor (or aspire to produce) overtly prestigious standard forms, associated with higher social status and education.

Linguistic change in men and women’s speech

- Changes in speech towards overtly prestigious forms are frequently initiated by women.
- Example 1: women in N. Carolina in the 1970s led a change to a new prestige pronunciation of word-final /r/ (already prestigious in the NE of the USA).

Example 2: Oberwart, Austria – moving from Hungarian to German

- Oberwart – a town which used to be in Hungary, but was absorbed by Austria in 1918.
 - German: associated with economic success
 - Hungarian associated with farmers and a working-class life.
 - Younger women switched to use more German in **social domains**, while men continued to use Hungarian.
 - German = new prestige language.
 - Hungarian = covert prestige + identification with working class.
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A more recent account of the differences between M and F speech: Holmes 1998.

- Four general sociolinguistic notions used to consider the phenomenon of M/F speech differences.
- **Function**: What is the purpose of talk?
- **Solidarity**: How well do the participants relate to each other?
- **Power**: Who's in charge of the conversation?
- **Status**: How does speech indicate social status?

[1] Function

- There is evidence that women tend to be highly oriented to **affective** or interpersonal meaning when talking to others, while men tend to focus more on the **referential** (pure information) aspect of conversations.

Holmes' first generalization:

"Women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction".

Different functional orientations in M/F speech

- Studies indicate women tend to pay more attention to the feelings of the people they are talking to than men do.
- Language is used to build and strengthen social relations, express emotions and understand how others may be feeling.
- One specific kind of example: women offer more compliments and apologies than men.

[2] Solidarity

- Robyn Lakoff (1975): various features in women's speech suggest that female speakers are unconfident, hesitant, and lacking in authority.
- Two examples: '**hedges**' and '**boosts**' occur more frequently in female speakers
 - **Hedging devices** include expressions like 'sort of/'kinda', 'I guess' and tag-questions like 'isn't it', 'aren't you'

- **Boosting devices** include intensifying adjectives and adverbs such as 'really', 'so' and emphatic stress

Lakoff's Interpretation of Hedges and Boosts

- RL: Boosts and hedges signal a speaker's lack of confidence in expressing an opinion.
- **Hedges** indicate understatement or seeking agreement.
 - The speaker doesn't want to force his/her view on others too directly.
- **Boosts** are used to try to convince a hearer to believe the speaker's words.

Holmes' reinterpretation of Lakoff 1975

- Women **do** use more hedges/boosts than men, but they **do not always** signal uncertainty.
- **Questions** are often used by female speakers in ways that focus on building social relations.
 - (a) Checking that others in a group hold the same views and are "connected"
 - It was terrible, isn't it?
 - (b) '**facilitative tag-questions**' can be used to include others in a conversation
 - Last week you bought a new jeep, didn't you Tom?
 - (c) tag questions can be used to soften a critical comment.
- Tag questions can be used for a broad range of functions that do not involve uncertainty.
- Female speakers' use of hedges/boosts most frequently signals **friendliness, solidarity, and informality, not under-confidence**.

Generalization

- This leads Holmes to a different generalization relating to the use of hedges and boosts by female speakers:
 - The common occurrence of boosts/hedges in F speech does **not** indicate women are under-confident speakers, but that they are more concerned with

the feelings of the people they are talking to.

Holmes' second cross-linguistic generalization:

- “Women tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more often than men do.”

[3] The Issue of Power

- There is a widespread belief that women talk much more than men and tend to dominate ‘talking time’ in conversations.

The reality of talking time in M/F conversations

- Studies of M/F interactions show that female speakers do **not** consistently monopolize talking time.
- In some contexts, men dominate talking and do not allow for women to speak so easily.
- Especially in situations where talking can increase one's status – public meetings, TV interviews with members of the public, company board meetings, etc.

Conversational Support

- New topics of conversation are “supported” in different ways by M and F speakers.
- New topics introduced in conversations by M speakers survive better and longer than topics introduced by F speakers.

Example 1: Topics introduced by a male speaker, then supported by a female.

Example 2: Topics introduced by a female speaker, then (not) supported by a male.

A Study of Conversational Topic Support (Fishman 1978)

- Women raised 62% of all topics and men 38%.
- Nearly all of the men's topics succeeded (i.e. they were encouraged by the other speaker and continued to be discussed).
- Only 35% of the women's topics were successful.

Use of 'minimal responses' and interruptions

- **Minimal responses/MRs**: the use of short expressions in the middle of a conversation, such as 'uhm/ah/uh-huh'.
- Fishman 1978: MRs are often used differently by M/F speakers.

M/F use of minimal responses

- Men often only gave a minimal response at the end of a woman's long speaking turn.
- Women often insert encouraging "mmhs", "yeahs" and "ohs" when men are talking, signaling their attention and that they are **cooperative** and **sensitive** conversation partners.

Interruptions

- Sometimes a listener may begin speaking before the previous speaker has finished his/her 'turn' in the conversation.
- Some interruptions are accidental.
- Other interruptions are attempts to **dominate** a conversation, cutting a speaker short.
- The ability to interrupt a speaker in a conversation is a display of **power**.
- Studies of M/F conversations show that interruptions are **mostly** made by men rather than women.
- → Men regularly exert their power in mixed-sex conversations and often seem less cooperative than female speakers.

The use of "**delayed minimal responses/DMRs**"

- 'minimal responses': oh, ah, uh-huh
- Normally indicate interest and attention.
- But if delayed, they indicate a **lack of interest** and inattention, discouraging the speaker from continuing to talk.
- DMRs can be used as a way to control conversations (a power device) and are found to occur more frequently in male speech than in female speech.

Single-sex groups interactions

- In all-boy groups, a power hierarchy evolves. Boys with greater power issue orders to less-powerful boys.
- All-girl groups use language in a more group-cooperative way.

Conclusions concerning power, talking time, and interruptions

- Holmes (1998): Men and women talk different amounts in different situations.
- Women view talk as an activity that can strengthen social bonds and build cohesion in a group or with single partners.
- When conversations are informal and intimate, women tend to talk more, using language as a way to develop new social relations and strengthen existing friendships.
- Women tend to focus more on behavior that will maintain and increase
- Men prioritize action-oriented or **status**-oriented behavior.

Holmes' Third Generalization:

- **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**.

[4] Status

- Initial observations (by Trudgill and others):
 - (a) women seem to use more standard forms than men from the same social group,
 - (b) standard forms are associated with higher social status.
- New hypothesis by Holmes:
 - It is males rather than females who are more focused on increasing status via speech.
- If this is so, why do females seem to use more prestige forms than males?

A Possible Answer: “Accommodation”

- Holmes: the observation of increased standard language in F speech **may** be due to the way language data is collected.
- In the 1970s - primarily through **interviews**.
- Most interviewers were middle-class, well-educated academics.
- This may have influenced male and female speech patterns in different ways
- In interviews, women may *change* their speech and adapt it to:
 - (a) the standard forms spoke by the middle-class academic interviewers
 - (b) the formality of an interview situation.
- The phenomenon of **accommodation**.
- Speech accommodation has been found to be more common in F speakers than in M speakers.

Increased linguistic sensitivity in female speakers

- Speech accommodation may also be a manifestation of general increased linguistic flexibility in females.
- Chambers (1992):

The empirical evidence clearly shows that women are much more able performers than men in a whole rang of situations.

Holmes fourth suggested generalization:

- Women are stylistically more flexible than men.
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- Why do female speakers often seem to show greater sensitivity to the person they are speaking to than men do, leading to greater accommodation?
 - Three possible explanations 🙋

The general “nature vs. nurture” debate

- What are language and other gender-related differences between men and women to be attributed to?
- ‘**nature**’ = we are predestined to certain forms of behavior due to our biological sex
- ‘**nurturing**’ = we are raised in ways that encourage the development of certain modes of behavior
- Or a combination effect - both biology and cultural learning?

1. Different patterns of socialization

- Males and females are often socialized in different ways - raised with different expectations of their behavior.
- In many societies, **males** may be encouraged to develop individual power and status.
- **Females** may often be taught styles of behavior that emphasize the value of social relations and support for others.
- A ‘cultural’, nurture-type explanation.

2. Imbalance in M/F power leads to different patterns of behavior

- In male-dominated societies, men may be free to speak as they like.
- Women in subordinate positions must learn to develop non-confrontational behavior and use language in cooperative, supportive ways.
- A female strategy for dealing with M/F mismatches in power.

3. A ‘biological’ explanation

- Possibly, women might have some **innate** linguistic advantage over men, giving them more advanced linguistic skills.
- Differences in brain lateralization may give women a neurological advantage over men and provide a basis for the increased development of linguistic skills.

Where does this M/F language asymmetry come from?

- Many studies show that females demonstrate greater skills in language than males, on average.
- Girls learn to read faster than boys and show fewer problems with dyslexia.
- Women dominate professions in which language abilities are particularly important.
- But there is also individual variation.
- Some males have strong language skills.
- Some females have less than averagely high language skills.
- What might explain this?

A link to testosterone levels?

- Recent research has shown that sex-related differences in linguistic ability may relate to levels of testosterone, normally higher in males.
- Kung et al (2016) measured early post-natal testosterone levels in 1-3 month old infants and tracked the linguistic development of these children between the ages of 18-30 months.
- Children with higher post-natal levels of testosterone, typically boys, developed a smaller expressive vocabulary than girls who regularly had lower levels of testosterone.
- Individual variation in language abilities might relate to early differences in levels of testosterone.

Holmes' own view

- Perhaps all three factors work together to result in the M/F patterns frequently found around the world.
 - Socialization patterns ('nurture')
 - Imbalances in power in society
 - Biological differences ('nature')
- A small but significant biological advantage might help females who are socialized in stereotypical gender-biased ways within male-dominated societies, providing women with more advanced abilities in language than average males.

The direction of current research into language and gender

- Increased emphasis on within-sex variation
- Not all women or men speak in the same gender-specific ways.
- Variation occurs according to ethnicity, age, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, urban/rural differences and other factors.

Solving a puzzle

- Some reports suggest that women are more traditional than men in their speech patterns – they use older, ‘more correct’ forms.
- Other studies suggest women are innovators, adopting new prestige forms before male speakers do.
- Which characterization is correct?
- Are female speakers traditionalists or innovators?

Two patterns of F variation in Africa

- **Cameroon.** The pronunciation (tonal system) of **Kera** is changing.
- Female speakers in **urban areas** are leading the change – **innovating**.
- But women in **rural areas** are resisting the change and are more conservative than male speakers – **more traditional**.
- Women are both innovating and being more traditional than men – depending on where they live – city or countryside.

South Africa and Zulu

- Women in rural areas use ‘**hlonipa**’, traditional taboo-related language. A symbol of ‘submissive femininity’ and respect for males.
- Young women in cities are adopting ‘**Tsotsitaal**’, a mixture of Zulu and English.
- A new symbol of self-empowered liberal femininity, ‘streetwise’ and modern.
- Women are both traditionalists and innovators. Rural vs. urban differences.

Conclusions

- Women are innovators and traditionalists.
 - Both 'styles' have symbolic value and are distinct from male patterns of speech.
 - Women have been suggested to be linguistically more '**extreme**' than men – either emphasizing the use of older forms or developing new ways of speaking.
 - The study of within-sex language variation leads to more complex pictures of M/F differences in language.
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Language and Gender Part 2 - Sexism in Language

Linguistic sexism has been argued to occur when language:

1. portrays women in negative ways.
2. supports the view that men have a greater, more central importance in society than women.
3. fails to provide women with the same linguistic resources available to men for the description of their experiences – lexical gaps.

Language and sexism: general examples

- The sequencing of M before F terms:
- men and women
- The replacement of a woman's family name with her husband's name:
- Mary Smith -> Mrs. Mary Croft

English gendered nouns

- host/hostess, actor/actress, emperor/empress
- Critique: the male form functions as the core foundation, and the feminine form is 'derived' from the male form.
- This has led to campaigns to replace M/F pairs of this type:

- actor/actress -> actor
- air hostess -> flight attendant
- fireman -> firefighter

Issue: Can “man” be used as a generic (i.e. gender-neutral) term for ‘humans’?

- man is often used to mean human and represent both men and women:
- Man is constantly faced by challenges.
- Two issues:
 - The use of the male term ‘man’ as representative of both genders supports the primacy of males and their higher ‘visibility’.
 - Is ‘man’ really available for use as a true generic term? Or is it a ‘fake’ generic, really having a predominantly male meaning?

How the word ‘man’ came into English

- From the early root *men-* or *mon-* meaning ‘to think’ (now also in the word mind).
- Intelligence was attributed specifically to humans → man used to refer to humans in general in Old English (regardless of gender).
- *wer* was used for man and *wif* for woman (now modern wife).
- *wer* and *wif* occurred as compounds with *man* – *wer-man*, *wif-man*
- *wif-man* became modern woman

Is man still a generic term?

- Compared with the genuine generic term (e.g. human, person, dog), man is **not** really gender-neutral:
 - *She is the best man for the job.
 - → She is the best person for the job.
- Consequence: replacement of ‘man’ in many expressions
 - man-made → artificial, synthetic

- prehistoric man → prehistoric people

→ An associated problem – pronouns:

- Traditionally no gender-neutral singular pronoun to refer to a person of unidentified gender.
 - Only he and she – both gender-specific.
- → difficulties when we need to write in a gender-neutral way:
 - Every visitor to the Grand Canyon feels he has an unforgettable experience.
- Often both M and F pronouns have been used in a clumsy way:
- Everyone thinks he or she has the answer.
- In **colloquial** speech, people often use a third person plural pronoun instead: they/their, even if there is no plural referent:
- Has anybody brought camera?
their
- But singular they is still often avoided in formal written English
- Further, recent development: new personal choice of they/them/their as an individual's specified pronouns.

Lexical gaps

- The **absence** of certain expected words
- For males, there are words to describe a person who is sexually active/promiscuous in a positive way.
- stud and virile
- There don't seem to be **positive** equivalents to describe women with parallel behavior
- Instead, there are very many words describing women in **negative** ways
- One study in the 1970s found 220 negative words for women
- Men have a large vocabulary available for insulting women, but women have far fewer words available to insult men.

Possible signs of change?

- Female college students in the US may now be applying to men certain terms previously used to refer to women in negative ways.
 - A recent dictionary of college slang use:
 - That guy's such a slut.
 - Some new terms are being created:
 - Don't be such a Chad!
 - New negative terms for promiscuous, unselective males:
 - mane-whore
 - fuckboy/fuckboi

A worrying pattern: historical change of M/F word pairs

- Often M/F pairs of words begin as simple M/F equivalents, but diverge over time.
- When this happens, some negative meaning frequently is attached to the **female**
 - Master and mistress originally meant a man or a woman in authority, but now mistress has negative meaning towards female
 - Whore once means lover of either sex but now restricted to female lovers, then prostitutes, then negatively to other sexually-active women.

Final note

- Many occurrences of 'sexism' in English and other western languages have been eliminated in recent decades.
- Other 'hidden' sexist patterns may still remain and need further attention.
- If language has the power to influence our thinking (linguistic relativity), the existence of sexist language may subconsciously promote sexist attitudes, so the replacement of sexist language patterns is important.