# Language and Society - Team 1

Course Project: Individual Analysis

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## 1 Group Progress

The group progess report can be seen in one of the files attached herewith in the repository.

## 2 Individual Analysis

Picking up from the last mid-semester report I submitted, I read up on Lakoff's article [1] where Lakoff talks about her dominance theory and how women's linguistic behaviour might be one of the important factors in pushing their portrayal as a subordinate group in society. I also read up on Andrew White's Women's usage of specific Linguistic Functions in the context of Casual Conversations [3] and based my observations on the same. I went on to analyse some of the movies we selected keeping in mind the analysis of the aforementioned linguists.

The question that arose in front of us was: is it women's linguistic behaviour that forces them into sub-ordinance, or is it the lowered confidence that we see in certain women while they are in a subordinate or weak position that forces a certain kind of linguistic behaviour onto them?

To tackle the above question, I worked with the team to roll out a survey, which collected data regarding daily conversation of people of different gender, with the main aim being to verify Lakoff's views. The said survey can be found here: Survey Form
and included questions related to the Dominance Theory, as discussed in the previous report.

Furthermore, I read up on Tannen's work, especially Gender and Discourse [2], which dwelled upon certain major facts about the variation of language used with respect to gender and its effect on identities. This opened doors for me to explore the work of some other related linguists in this field too, some of them being Shari Kendall, Jacquelyn Rahman and Susan Herring.

## 3 Observations

### 3.1 Based on Initial Overview

On an initial overview, my attention was specifically drawn towards conversational patterns in specific contexts. This could be particularly seen in one of the movies 'Queen' in the bar scene where Rani is referred to as "My Queen" by Vijayalakshmi, when she is sad about Vijay. Vijayalakshmi does this to establish her identity as both a proud Indian and female while appealing to Rani and discouraging potential negative reactions that she might have from Vijay by casting him "in the role of onlookers at an event only for women".
This example shows the co-construction of different varieties of language with respect to gender, establishing power and identity at the same time.

## 3.2 Based on Lakoff's vs Tannen's Ideas

As discussed in the previous report, Lakoff believes that it is linguistic behaviour that forces women into subordinance and explains it with the help of certain features which include but are not limited to the use of hedges, apologetic phrases and expletives, as proposed in her dominance theory.

Tannen also proceeds with a similar approach, however, she does not tend to highlight features in women's use of language. She shows the same by questioning the very ideology behind the way women use discourse to defend patriarchal structure. This can be seen in a survey taken by Shari Kendall in 2007 which shows that there is a higher probability of a couple to although behave equally in a parental relationship where they negotiate the forms and meanings of their parental and work-related identities, however, in discourse, it is often seen that women position their husbands as breadwinners in the work sphere and themselves as primary caregivers in the domestic sphere.

For example, when talking with a friend, one of the women refers to her employment as optional, contingent on the cost of daycare, revealing her assumption that the husband's salary, which is not optional, supports the family.

The mother in the other couple claims the position of the main parent by frequently questioning her husband's parenting. In one instance, for example, she tells their two-year old daughter to take out of her mouth a cough drop that the father had given her. The mother expresses disapproval by saying, "Yuck!" When the child asks, "What's' that?," her mother tells her, "It's a cough drop. You don't want that anyway." The father then defends his action by saying that the child wanted the cough drop. The mother heaves a disapproving sigh but says no more. The father again defends himself by saying, "It CAN'T hurt her," to which the mother responds, "Well, it can choke her." In these and many other examples, Kendall shows that whereas their ideologies support parental equality, the women's discourse supports traditional gendered roles.

## 3.3 Based on rolled-out survey

Although the entire team did an in-depth analysis of the responses that can be found in the Team report attached, the survey also played a very pivotal role in finding out the answer to one of the questions I raised in my last individual report to verify Lakoff's ideas. Given the distribution of use of hedges, expletives, apologetic phrases by women even in today's world, I conclude that Lakoff's ideas were indeed true up to an extent, since there was a significant increase in the usage of the aforementioned features for women relatively compared to those of men.

## 3.4 Based on Variety of Language Use Online

I further read upon Susan Herring, who discussed the use of language with respect to gender. Herring and her colleagues dwelled upon the fact that widespread predictions that gender would be invisible online and therefore gender-related disparities and inequalities would disappear. However, this did not come out to be true. They noted that women tended to post shorter messages and were more likely to "qualify and justify their assertions, apologize, express appreciation, support others and in general, adopt an 'aligned' stance with their interlocutors". In contrast, men tended to post relatively longer messages, were more like to "begin and close discussions in mixed-gender groups, assert opinions strongly as 'facts', challenge others, use crude language (including insults and profanity) and in general adopt an adversarial stance towards their interlocutors".

Tannen enunciates this by talking about women's use of emphatic punctuations, capitalization and repetition of words, letters of punctuation mark,which are parallel to their use of amplitude, intonation and elongation of sounds to create emphasis and emotional valence in speaking, with parallel examples of miscommunication in cross-gender interactions.

## 3.5 Challenges faced

Although the various works of linguists provided an insightful experience which allowed me to analyse movies and discourse in a much better way, there have been instances that still do not necessarily prove to have effect in today's world. For example, Lakoff's views, although may sound very patriarchal, and one might rule them out in the year 2020 at first glance, but they were confirmed through the survey we rolled out.

Similarly, Kendall's and Herring's views although are very strong, and verified by surveys they took, there are a instances where I did not find that to be true, given my daily experience in discourse. One of its example is the use of language online, where Herring proposes that women tend to use repetitions and emphatic punctuations more as compared to men, however, with the increasing internet usage, and my interactions with people online, I found the proposal to apply equally to men as well.

This is something that is not found with a strong base, but has dwindling beliefs. However, the fact that we should more be concerned about is that these views may not be 100% accurate, but can definitely be said to exist in the society we live in.

# 4 Conclusion & Future Work

When I started off this project, I was not aware of the impacts and influence language makes in our daily life. As the project proceeded, I analysed four bollywood movies, read up on various research papers to gain insights, and started viewing discourse with a totally different perspective. Now I could note the small, but impactful differences in the use of language via different people. I have a better understanding of people in general too, as I am able to keep track what kind of language they use to prove solidarity, power, identity etc.

Even in the near future, the insights gained from this project will help me a lot in socially analysing situations, whether be it while watching movies, or in day to day discourse.

# References

[1] *Lakoff's Language and Women's Place.* URL: https://web.stanford.edu/class/linguist156/Lakoff_1973.pdf.

[2] D. Tannen. *Gender and Discourse.* Oxford Paperbacks. Oxford University Press, 1996. ISBN: 9780195101249. URL: https://books.google.co.in/books?id=DLWuQQAACAAJ.

[3] *Women's usage of specific Linguistic Functions.* URL: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/cels/essays/sociolinguistics/White5.pdf.

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