

MALE AND FEMALE SPEECH STYLES

Men and women use language differently. Differences in the choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, prosodic means are distinct enough to speak of male and female speech styles (Cameron & Coates, 1988; Clarke, Losoff, McCracken & Rood, 1984; Coates, 1993; Crystal, 2003b: 21; Goroshko, 1999; Holmes, 1995; McConnel-Ginet, Borker & Furman, 1980; Mills, 2002; Tannen, 1990; Tubbs & Moss, 1991). The existence of the two speech styles is the linguistic reflection of social relations: until recently men have exercised more power in society and the tendency is still rather strong. Men's verbal behaviour is more aggressive as it is supposed to demonstrate a position of dominance. Women were assigned a submissive role both in the workplace and at home, which accounts for more co-operative and less aggressive female speech strategies.

Some regular features of *male speech strategies* are

- initiating and receiving more verbal and non-verbal interaction than women;
- introducing more topics while talking with other people;
- interrupting and disputing more frequently;
- giving monosyllabic responses;
- ignoring another person's remarks;
- making one's point directly, explicitly, and rationally;
- being dogmatic;
- being reserved.

Basic female speech strategies are

- supporting and maintaining conversation rather than initiating it
 - ❖ by asking more questions,
 - ❖ by encouraging the speaker to proceed,
 - ❖ by responding more to other people's remarks;
- being more positive than males;
- being verbose;
- being emotive rather than objective;
- being less dogmatic than males.

While speaking, men rely more on the lexical and grammatical systems; alongside these two, women make effective use of the prosodic system – their pitch range is usually wider than men's, stress patterns are more distinct.

As to vocabulary and syntactic structures, men tend to use

- ❖ slang,
- ❖ obscene words,
- ❖ terms,
- ❖ simple, sometimes incorrect sentences.

Women are likely to use

- ❖ effect and emotively charged words,

- ❖ exclamations,
- ❖ intensifiers (*so, such*, etc.),
- ❖ diminutive forms and terms of endearment,
- ❖ deferential forms,
- ❖ socially prestigious lexical and syntactic forms,
- ❖ forms of politeness,
- ❖ tag questions,
- ❖ coordinate and subordinate syntactic structures.

These are but the most general features of male and female styles of speech. The lists are far from being complete; there are, of course, many exceptions, individual, social, and stylistic variations. In addition, in communication, the system of *male/female speech styles* overlaps with that of *powerful/powerless speech*.

Forms of ***powerless speech*** are tag questions, hedges, apologies, phrases that disclaim responsibility (for example, *I'm not sure*), exclamations, forms of politeness, broken sentences, illogical sequences. ***Powerful speech*** is supposed to be clear, direct, and logical.

The association between powerless speech and female speech styles reinforces the old gender stereotype of women as weaker and less competent members of society. Though in communication, the gender factor is not sufficient to understand how powerful or powerless a person is. We have to take into account a broad range of factors:

- ❖ social factors – positions and roles of communicators; their origin; educational, occupational, professional, financial status; social distance between them;
- ❖ situational context – setting and time of interaction, formal/informal context of interaction;
- ❖ physiological factors – the speaker's sex, age, physical condition;
- ❖ psychological factors – state of mind, mood, attitudes, feelings, emotions, close/friendly/casual/formal relationship between communicators;
- ❖ type of discourse – business, academic, political, conversational discourse, etc.; themes, topics discussed; formal/informal style, etc.;
- ❖ pragmatic factors – speakers' goals, intentions, strategies, etc.;
- ❖ communicative competence of the speaker

The same person can use different styles in different speech situations. Let us consider the speech styles of Dumbledore and McGonagall, the characters of the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling. Professor Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts school, is old and experienced; his wisdom, expertise, understanding of human nature are unrivalled. He does not have to be strict with his teachers or students, but his politeness is never mistaken for softness. Dumbledore's verbal strategies are not meant to demonstrate his power, but both friends and enemies know that he is a very powerful man.

Professor McGonagall, a female character, is explicitly described as a very stern person; students feel at once that she is not someone to cross. To characterize

McGonagall's speech style, Rowling often uses words and expressions such as *snorted*, *barked*, *said tartly*, *said sharply*, *voice cracked like a whip*. McGonagall's reputation and professional standing are high; her curt style of speech is rather associated with that of men – it suggests competence and confidence. Yet when Dumbledore is treacherously killed, we see a different McGonagall. Similarly, when Harry is in dead peril, her speech style is different. Her confidence is gone, her speech shows every sign of powerlessness – broken sentences, hedges (*I can't believe it, I mean, I don't think*), expressions that disclaim responsibility (*I don't know exactly how ...*) hesitations, semantic and lexical repetitions, self-accusations, excuses, and explanations.

Therefore, *male/female speech style* is not synonymous with *powerful/powerless speech*. The choice of style depends on who people talk to, on when and where they communicate, on what they say, and why they say it.

Analyzing different kinds of authentic texts for the *NOW WE ARE IN CHARGE* project, we have noticed that typically both male and female authors adopt powerful speech style. In our opinion, it can be explained by the fact that writing an article, a report, or a comment, an author, irrespective of his/her gender identity, tries to be convincing. We have also noticed that while discussing the texts and working on the tasks, some female participants of the project quite successfully combined female and male speech strategies. They might be positive, emotive, verbose, respond eagerly, use complex syntactic forms, exclamations, intensifiers and, at the same time, they might be rational, dogmatic, speak directly and explicitly, initiate interaction, interrupt and argue.

Check Your Understanding

Questions

1. In your opinion, is there any difference between male/female speech style and male/female language?
2. What are male speech strategies? female speech strategies?
3. What are the general features of male and female speech styles?
4. What is powerful/powerless language? How is this notion different from the notion of male/female speech style?
5. What factors account for the use of powerful or powerless language in communication?