Interrupting the Imbalance:

Linguistic Power Dynamics between Men and Women

Abby Slater

Introduction

This paper will investigate the linguistic devices males and females use to establish power in conversation. I ask the question, do men and women differ in their use of powerful language within a given context. I hypothesized that, in the studied context, men would use more of what is considered "powerful language," and women would use more "weak language."

This topic has been studied previously, but I wanted to study the language and interaction in a group of multiple men and multiple women. The research for this study was influenced heavily by the work of Pamela Fishman, who investigated intimate and natural conversation between heterosexual couples. In her article "The Work Women Do," Fishman claims, "there is an unequal distribution of work in conversation. We can see from the differential use of strategies that the women are more actively engaged in insuring interaction than the men (Fishman 404).

This is not solely a linguistic issue; it reaches other areas of society as well. Many sociolinguists believe that language imbalance perpetuates sexism, and that "the marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of" (Lakoff 45).

Not only does women's speech tend to be self-subversive, but men's language is often domineering and aggressive, to the point where women are forced further into their lower role in society.

Methods

To understand these gendered power dynamics, I gathered data from the popular TV show, "Real Time with Bill Maher." More specifically, I observed the roundtable portion of the show, in which groups of 4-6 panelists—ranging from comedians to politicians—join Maher and discuss predetermined subjects. There is nearly always a gender imbalance, with a difference ranging from 0-2 more men than women in the six episodes I watched. In these six episodes, a total of 16 male panelists and 12 female panelists were interviewed.

To gauge these displays of either powerful or subversive language, I used 5 linguistic variables: Interruptions, Attention Beginnings, Minimal Responses, Hedges, and Inappropriate Comments. I counted how many times each gender used one of these variables. To account for the difference in number of men and women, I turned the raw data I gathered into ratios so a relationship could be better seen.

I also excluded Maher's instances of interruptions and minimal response from the data. Because he is the primary speaker and his job is to guide the conversation, he interrupts and responds substantially more than his guests. I believe this is regardless of his gender, thus it was not relevant to the data and would only skew it.

Interruptions

Interruptions are a prominent indicator of perceived power in a conversation. It has been found that men tend to "use more interruptions than women, particularly in mixed-gender interactions," and that these interactions "enhance the speaker's interpersonal dominance" (Wiley et. al 92).

Attention Beginnings

Attention beginnings are found at the start of statements and are used to grasp the attention of the interlocutor(s). Examples include phrases such as, "You know what's interesting—" or "Listen to this—" Attention beginnings are seen as an indicator of weak language, thus I hypothesize that it will be used more among women. Fishman explains: "The use of 'This is really interesting' as an introduction shows that the user cannot assume that the remark itself will be seen as worthy of attention. At the same time, the user tries single-handedly to establish the interest of their remarks" (Fishman 401). This feature is particularly important to observe in a roundtable discussion, in which there is more interaction and more speakers to address.

Minimal Responses

For the purpose of this study, minimal response was considered any slight interjection in conversation that was not intended as an interruption. Examples range from, "right," and "yes," to non-verbal responses, such as clapping or nodding. Only verbal examples were counted, since not all non-verbal instances were caught by the camera. Both men and women tend to use minimal response, but in different ways and for different reasons. Fishman writes, "the male usages of the minimal response

displayed lack of interest...the women also made this type of minimal response at times,
but their most frequent use of the minimal response was as 'support work'" (Fishman,
402). Essentially, women tend to verbally support their interlocutor and show interest
and engagement by way of minimal response. I hypothesized that, in an interaction with
so many interlocutors, there would be many instances of minimal response and women
would use the feature more.

Hedges

Hedges are comments that are used to weaken or refute one's own claim, whether
consciously or unconsciously. They can be used at the beginning or end of a statement,
and include phrases such as, "I think—," "I'm not sure but—" or "that's just my opinion."
Women, who tend to avoid seeming too domineering or sure of themselves, are the
primary users of hedges. According to Tannen, "when they think they're being nice,
women often end up appearing deferential and unsure of themselves or what they want"
(Tannen 436). Hedging is used to achieve this feeling of kindness, politeness, and
submissiveness.

Inappropriate Comments

For the purpose of this study, I classified "inappropriate comments" as either
sexual comments/phrases or the use of swear words. I hypothesized that men would
make more inappropriate comments than women, simply based on my own experience
with swearing in society.

Results

Date of Episode	Number of Men (excluding Maher)	Number of Women	Length of Video
November 10, 2017	2	3	~9 min.
November 17, 2017	3	2	~8 min.
January 26, 2018	3	2	~7 min.
February 9, 2018	3	2	~10 min.
February 16, 2018	2	2	~6 min.
March 16, 2018	3	1	~8 min.

Figure 1: Episode Breakdown

While it was hypothesized that men would use higher rates of both observed powerful linguistic features, the data in figures 2 and 3 shows that the only linguistic feature that men led in was interrupting. Women led all three categories of weak language substantially, using almost 5 times as many attention beginnings per woman, over twice as much minimal response per woman, and 2.5 times as many hedges per woman.

Looking at the raw numbers, there was an equal use of inappropriate comments by men and women, which was skewed by the November 11th episode. One female panelist, a comedian named Sarah Silverman, made three inappropriate comments, which is more than the rest of the women from all episodes combined.

Raw Data

Linguistic Feature	Men (16)	Women (12)
Interrupting	33	14
Inappropriate Comments	5	5
Minimal Responses	14	22
Hedges	7	13
Attention Beginnings	1	3

Figure 2: Raw Data

Data by Ratio

Linguistic Feature	Men (16)	Women (12)
Interrupting	2.06/man	1.17/woman
Inappropriate Comments	.31/man	.42/woman
Minimal Responses	.88/man	1.83/woman
Hedges	.44/man	1.08/woman
Attention Beginnings	.06/man	.25/woman

Figure 3: Data by Ratio

Conclusion

In conclusion, there were more interruptions per male panelist, which indicates powerful language. Female panelists, however, led in every other category, including inappropriate comments, which are considered a powerful language feature. The data in this category was skewed by one female panelist, so it's difficult to truly analyze the use of sexual comments and swearing in this context without further investigation.

The heavy use of weak linguistic variables among women in this context is disheartening, especially given the context. The women interviewed were of equal, if not higher, education and power level. A former White House employee and highly educated woman, Nayyera Haq, was cut off and disregarded multiple times just because of her gender. She also felt the need to repeatedly establish her position, mentioning multiple times that she "worked for the White House." Even though she was interviewed alongside a comedian and a radio host, Naq, a former senior official for the US State Department, felt inferior enough to have to reestablish her authority, and was still treated as an inferior.

The reason I chose to study a roundtable discussion as opposed to a conversation between two speakers or a simple, one-person broadcast is because I felt it would yield the most organic conversation and thus the most realistic results. I am confident that the imbalance the data represents can be accurately applied to the real world, and carries meaning beyond this particular show and this particular group of speakers.

It is important that language is no longer seen as just language, but as a powerful tool with which one can establish authority, subjugate themself, or bring others down. Mills studies this exact subject in her paper, and states "for those who see language as a determining element in the subjugation of women, change in language use will make a

substantial difference to women's condition" (Mills 185). To increase women's place in

society, language must be considered. By establishing ourselves at the same linguistic

level as men, we as women can prove our strength, intelligence, and equality.

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