‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman’

Simone de Beauvoir
A person learns how to do and ‘display’ being a woman in a particular setting. People perform particular identities through the use of language.

– This is mostly done unconsciously as we repeat acts (gestures, movement, ways of using language) that people from our own gender around us use.

These are not natural acts, they are acquired from interaction in a certain society.
Two Approaches

**Dominance:**

- This approach views the difference in language use as a result of male domination that women’s language is a way to keep women in a subordinate position.
- Lakoff 1975: Found that women use more overt polite forms, hedges, indirectness... Thus, less linguistic power.

**Difference:**

- This approach argues that girls and boys live in different subcultures, and as a result they grow up learning different ways of using language.
Critique of Approaches

• In a critique of both the dominance and difference approaches, Cameron (1998) argues that the expression of gender is always context-specific.
  – He suggests viewing gender by looking at how people in particular social and cultural interactions do gender in their use of language.
The relationship between gender and language is always indirect and mediated by other factors such as:

- **Particular roles**: mother, teacher, wife... etc.
- **Activities**: shopping, praying, gossiping... etc.
- **Personality traits**: modest, arrogant... etc.

The person is said to have **multiple identities** which may all play at the same time or at different contexts.
Politeness and Gender

When comparing men and women languages, women:

- Apologize more.
- Use indirect speech acts.
- Use more indirect strategies.
  - More positive politeness strategy.
    - Example: ‘Hello gorgeous’
      - If uttered by a woman to her friend → positive politeness and expression of intimacy.
      - If uttered by a man on the street → An act of harassment.
In Living Language George Keith and John Shuttleworth record suggestions that:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>talk more than men</td>
<td>swear more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talk too much</td>
<td>don't talk about emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are more polite</td>
<td>talk about sport more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are indecisive/hesitant</td>
<td>talk about women and machines in the same way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complain and nag</td>
<td>insult each other frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask more questions</td>
<td>are competitive in conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support each other</td>
<td>dominate conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are more co-operative</td>
<td>speak with more authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>give more commands</td>
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<td></td>
<td>interrupt more</td>
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</tbody>
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Robin Lakoff, in 1975, published an influential account of women's language. She believes that:

1. **Hedge**: Using phrases like “sort of”, “kind of”, “it seems like”, and so on.
2. **Super polite forms**: “Would you mind...”,”I'd appreciate it if...”, “…if you don't mind”.
3. **Tag questions**: “You're going to dinner, aren't you?”
4. **Empty adjectives**: Nice, divine, lovely, adorable, and so on
5. **Hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation**: Formal forms and clear enunciation.
6. **Minimal responses**: Women use responses like 'yeah' or 'mhmm' to signal their active involvement in the conversation and to support the current speaker.
7. **Have a special lexicon**: Women use more words for colours and men use more words for sports.
Robin Lakoff believes that:

8. **Question intonation in declarative statements**: Women make declarative statements into questions by raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing **uncertainty**.
   - **Example**: “What school do you attend? Eton College?”

9. **Apologise more**: “I'm sorry, but I think that...”

10. **Modal constructions**: Such as *can, would, should, ought*
    - **Example**: “Should we turn up the heat?”

11. **Indirect commands and requests**: For example, “My, isn't it cold in here?” - a request to turn the heat on or close a window.

12. **More intensifiers**: Especially *so* and *very*
    - **Example**: “I am *so* glad you came!”

13. **Lack a sense of humour**: Women do not tell jokes well and often don't understand the punch line of jokes.