

# CHAPTER 7

## Age and Gender

**Sources:**

**An Introduction to Sociolinguistics By Janet Holmes**

**Introducing Sociolinguistics By Miriam Meyerhoff**

# A- Language and Gender

- **Sex** is **biologically** determined. One is born a male or a female.
- **Gender** is **socially** determined. One chooses to speak either in a feminine or a masculine way.
- **Notes on Gender:**
  - It involves a consideration of the **psychological**, **social**, and **cultural differences** between **men** and **women**.
  - It is a **construction** (i.e. **acquired socially**).
  - We **create** our **gender identity** through the **language we speak**. This is **culturally** determined and **reinforced** by **socialisation practices**.

# Differences and Features

- **Men** and **women** speak **differently**. These **differences** can be:
  - Phonological
  - Lexical
  - Morphological
  - Syntactic
  - Pragmatic

**Gender features** in a language fall under **two categories**:

**1- Exclusive features:** Features associated with speakers of a **PARTICULAR** gender.

**Example:** kinship terms: **Mother, niece, aunt** = females  
**Father, nephew, uncle** = males



(Contrasted with 'cousin' which can be for a male or a female). ← **Gender-neutral**

**2- Preferential features:** Features distributed across speakers of **BOTH** genders but **used more** frequently **by one** than the other.

**Example:** Standard forms are used by both genders but women tend to use it more than men and by definition men use more vernacular forms than women do.

# Differences Between Men and Women

- When they **speak**, **men** and **women differ** in many aspects such as:
  1. **Turn-taking and interruption**
  2. **Minimal responses**
  3. **Using hedges**
  4. **Giving compliments**
  5. **Asking questions**
  6. **Apologising**

# 1- Turn-Taking and Interruption

- **There are two types of interruption:**
  1. **Disruptive interruption:** It **restricts** the **contribution** of the interrupted speaker.
  2. **Supportive interruption:** It is meant to **encourage** the speaker to **keep** the conversation going on.
- **Who interrupts more?**
  - **Men** interrupt **more** than women **disruptively** because they want to **dominate** and give themselves **authority**.
  - **Women** interrupt **more** than men **supportively** because they **consider feelings** and are more **sensitive** than men.

## 2- Minimal Responses

- **Minimal responses:** They are **monosyllabic utterances** such as “**yeah**” and “**huh**” associated with **cooperative** language use.
- Minimal responses are used mainly to show **agreement**.
- **Who uses more minimal responses?**  
**Women** use minimal responses **more** than men as they **support** and **sympathise** more with the speaker. **Men** prefer to keep **silent** until given the turn or choose to **interrupt** if not.

# 3- Using Hedges

- **Hedges:** A word or a clause that is meant to **lessen** the **effect** of an **utterance**. = Softeners

**Example:** I think, I guess, you know, maybe, sort of, somewhat... etc

- **Who uses more hedges?**

**Women** use hedges **more** than **men** because women care more about pursuing a style of interaction based on **mutual agreement** and **support**.

# 4- Giving Compliments

- **Compliment:** A polite expression of praise or admiration.
- Compliments fall under **positive politeness strategies** which are directed at:
  - (1) Approving of the listener's **appearance** e.g. "I like your hair today!", **ability** e.g. "excellent shot!", **possession** e.g. "Nice car!".
  - (2) Stressing **friendliness** and the desire of being treated as a member of a group rather than as a single individual.
- **Who gives more compliments?**

Compliments are **most appropriate** among people who **know each other well**. **Women** are mostly either the speaker, addressee or both. So **women** give **more** compliments.
- **Compliments have different functions.** They can express:
  1. Solidarity
  2. Admiration
  3. Envy
  4. Harassment

# 5- Asking Questions

- **Questions can be asked to:**
  1. **Support** the speaker
  2. Show **skepticism**
  3. **Challenge** the speaker
- For **men**, **questions** are usually a **request for information** whereas for **women** they can **also** be a means of **encouraging** the other's **conversational contribution** or **acquiring attention** from others conversationally involved.
- **Who asks more questions?**

**Women** ask **more** questions to **support** the speaker whereas **men** ask **more** questions to **challenge** him/her.

# 6- Apologising

- **Apology:** A speech act that is used to **remedy** an offence for which the **speaker** takes responsibility.

**Example:** “I’m sorry”, “I apologise”

- **Apologising depends on factors such as:**
  1. **Power** relationship
  2. **Gender** of recipient
  3. Social **distance**
  4. **Seriousness** of the offence
- **Who apologises more?**  
**Women** apologise more than **men**.

# 7- Other Differences

- Other features of women language according to Lakoff:
  1. Tag questions, e.g. “she is very nice, isn’t she?”
  2. Rising intonation on declaratives, e.g. “it’s really good.” 
  3. Empty adjectives, e.g. “nice”, “lovely”, “cute”.
  4. Precise color terms, e.g. “magenta”, “aquamarine”.
  5. Intensifiers e.g. “just”, “so”.
  6. Hypercorrect grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms.
  7. Super-polite forms, e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms.
  8. Avoidance of strong swear words, e.g. “fudge”, “sugar” .
  9. Emphatic stress, e.g. “it was a BRILLIANT performance.”

# Explanation of Women's Linguistic Behaviour

- Sociolinguists tried to **explain** why women speak differently than men. They **studied** the linguistic behaviour of women using more standard forms than men and came up with 4 explanations:
  1. **Social status**
  2. **Role in society**
  3. **Status as a subordinate group**
  4. **Speech expressing masculinity**

# 1- Social Status

- Sociolinguists **claim** that **women believe that the way they speak signals their social class background or social status in community.** They are more **status-conscious** than men.
- So **women** use **more** standard forms than men because standard forms are **prestigious** and usually **associated with people from a higher class.**
  - Sociolinguists believe this is especially true for **unemployed women** as they **cannot use their occupations to signal social status.**
  - This is **NOT** true because it implies that working women use fewer standard forms than unemployed women. Research shows that working women use more standard forms than unemployed women.

## 2- Woman's Role as Guardian of Society's Values

- **Society** tends to **expect “better”** behaviour from women than from men.
  - Little boys are generally allowed **more freedom** than little girls.
  - Misbehaviour from boys are tolerated where girls are more quickly corrected.
  - Similarly, rule-breaking of any kind **by women is frowned upon more** severely than rule-breaking by men.
- So, society expects women to speak and behave **more correctly** and standardly than men because they are serving as **models** for children's speech.
- This explanation is true **BUT** not in all cases as an interaction between a mother and her child is more relaxed and informal. So, vernaculars can occur.

# 3- Subordinate Groups Must Be Polite

- Sociolinguists proposed that people who are subordinate **must be polite** and that is why women use more standard forms than men.
  - Children are expected to be polite to adults.
  - It is argued that “women, as a subordinate group, must avoid offending men – and so they must speak carefully and politely”.
- **BUT**, why should polite speech be equated with standard speech? One can express themselves politely using a vernacular and can be very insulting using RP (book, example 7, P: 166):

“You are an intolerable bore Mr. Brown. Why don’t you simply shut up and let someone speak who has more interesting ideas to contribute,” said Lord Huntly in the well-educated and cultured accent of the over-privileged.

Example from Classical Arabic by an poet (الخطيبة) satirizing his mother:

جزاك الله شرا من عجوزٍ \*\*\* ولقائك العقوقَ من البنين  
حياتك ما عملت حياةً سوءٍ \*\*\* وموتك قد يسر الصالحين

# Example 2

Book, example 8, P: 167

**Knocker:** Comin' down the club, Jim?

**Jim:** Not friggin' likely. It's rubbish that club.

**Knocker:** It ain't that bad. Music's cool. I seen a couple of sharp judies there, too. If we plays our cards right... Anyways you was keen enough las' week.

**Jim:** The music's last Knocker. I'm off down the Pier's ead if there ain't nothin' better on offer.

**Knocker:** Bleein' rozzers crawlin' round down there. Come down ours instead.

[Vernacular lexical items in the Liverpool dialect Scouse: judies (“girls”), last (“hopeless”) rozzers (“police”).]

## 4- Vernacular Forms Express Machismo

**Machismo** (/məʃɪzˌmɒz/): An aggressive male behaviour that emphasises the importance of being strong rather than being intelligent and sensitive.

- Men prefer vernacular forms because they carry **macho connotations** of masculinity and toughness and that is why women prefer not to use them.
  - Standards forms, by definition, tend to be **associated with female** values and femininity.
  - These vernacular forms are, then, valued by men even if they do not admit it. They have “**covert prestige**” as apposed to the “**overt prestige**” that standard forms have.
- **BUT**, if vernacular conveys connotations of masculinity, then do all men from all social classes use more vernacular forms in less formal contexts?

# Example 3

Book, example 11, P: 173

I was listening to New Zealand radio recently when they announced that they were going to be interviewing the Minister of Health after the news. I couldn't think who the Minister was. So I listened to the interview and I was very impressed with the policies **he** outlined, and particularly with **his** sensitive and sympathetic attitudes to the need for cervical screening for women. "How sensible," I thought, "what an intelligent **man**!" I waited for the end of the interview to find out who **he** was. "And that was an interview with the Minister of Health, **Helen Clark**," announced the interviewer. Well at least that explained the sympathetic attitudes to women's health issues.

# B- Language and Age

- **Age** plays a role as a factor that **influences** people's **linguistic choices**. By analysing children, teenagers and adults' speech, sociolinguistics agree that speech has **age-graded features**.
- These **features** show differences among different age groups **in terms of**:
  1. **Pitch**: It is difficult to determine the gender of a five year old child talking on the phone. When boys and girls hit puberty, they develop different pitches. **Men** are **lower** in **pitch**, **women** are **higher** in **pitch**.
    - **Social** and **cultural** factors play a role **before** that **physical growth** takes place. Young boys' voices often **become lower** in pitch than girls' voices **as a sign of masculinity**.
    - In **domains** that are **male-dominated** (e.g., politics), **women** tend to speak in a **deeper pitch** compared to average women which **either** reflects the public' preference for voices with masculine associations in politics **or** shows that female politicians are trying to gain acceptance in that male dominated domain.

# Age-Graded Features

- Not only **pitch** that makes a difference with age and language but there are language patterns that are appropriate for 10 year olds and teenagers that disappear as they grow older. **Age-graded features like:**
  2. **Vocabulary:**
    - **Swear words:** Teenagers tend to use more swear words than children or adults. Men restrict swearing to all-male settings whereas women reduce their swearing in all settings.
    - **Slang:** An area of vocabulary that young people use. It signals membership to the age group of teenagers. E.g. “wicked!” “rad!” to describe something they approve, “groovy” vs. “cool” to identify the person’s generation.
  3. **Pronunciation:** Different pronunciations can be a real give-away in guessing a person’s age. E.g. pronouncing “often” as /ɔ:fən/ is old-fashioned as opposed to the more modern /ɔ:ftən/ in British English.
  4. **Grammar:** E.g. “dreamt”, “learnt” and “burnt” vs. “dreamed”, “learned” and “burned”.