

Female Speech Style: Does it Change Over Time?

Kamisah Ariffin

Misyana Susanti Husin

Roselina Musahar

Academy of Language Studies

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia

Email: kamisah@pahang.uitm.edu.my

Email: misyana@melaka.uitm.edu.my

Email: roselina@pahang.uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Numerous examinations of gender speech styles have been conducted primarily based on real life conversations which were unprepared and spontaneous (Coates 1986; Tannen 1991; Githens 1991), but little has been done in other frameworks. This study looks at gender speech styles in the perspective of its portrayal in literary texts. It focuses on the analysis of stereotyped characteristics of female speech style as portrayed in three children's novels, written over a period of three centuries – 19th, 20th and 21st Centuries. The analysis is based on Lakoff's characteristics of female speech style – the use of special vocabulary, imprecise intensifiers, super polite forms, weak forms of expletives, hedges, tag questions and direct quotations, as portrayed in the novels. Since most creative writings are created based on the writers' observations on the reality of their surroundings, to a certain extent, they do rely on the stereotyped and generalized behaviour to make their written products believable, real and acceptable to the audience. Thus, this study also examines whether the female style of speaking changes over time, based on the writers' observations and perceptions.

Keywords: *female speech styles, stereotyped characteristics, literary texts*

Introduction

Any written product, creative writing in particular, is often regarded as an individual's enterprise or venture. However, writers usually base their creative writings, in terms of plots, contexts or characters, on their observations on the reality of their surroundings. They may, for example, observe that members of most cultures and societies have certain perceptions or stereotype views of the behaviour of men and women. These perceptions may include styles in dressing, activities, career and social roles in society. To a certain extent, writers rely on these usually stereotyped and generalized observations and portray the traits in their writing so as to make their written products believable, real and effective.

Observations on Female Speech Styles: An Overview

One of the earliest observations on stylistic sex differences in conversation is that of Jespersen's (1922) who claims that:

... women exercise a great deal and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions.

(cited in Smiths 1985: 14)

Jespersen claims that the differences in speech styles between men and women are due to the differences in the socialization, education and division of labour between the sexes. His observations have provided some useful starting points for other researchers in this field. Lakoff (1975), for example, observes that the differences in male and female speech styles are the consequences of social inequalities between the sexes. She claims that women have been taught to be respectful and unassertive which are expressed through a variety of linguistic variables, which in turn, reflect women's place in society.

Based on her observations, Lakoff posits her ten basic assumptions on the characteristics of women's speech style – the use of *hedges*, *(super) polite forms*, *tag questions*, *empty adjectives*, *hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation*, *special lexicon*, *direct quotation*, *question intonation in declarative statements*, *speaking in italic and lacking sense of humour*. She later characterizes these assumptions

under three main categories, that is, **Lexical Traits**, **Phonological Traits** and **Syntactic-Pragmatic Traits** (1977). However, this paper only deals with two of the categories, that is, the lexical traits and syntactic-pragmatic traits as phonological traits are not evident in writing. These are discussed as follows:

Lexical Traits

Under this category, Lakoff discusses women's use of special lexicon, imprecise intensifiers and super polite forms.

Special lexicon refers to the elaborated use of vocabulary when defining or describing certain objects or situations. Compared to men, women elaborate or use more words in certain 'womanly' areas such as fashion, cooking and decorations. Thus, specific colours such as purplish blue, are more likely to be used, instead of blue or purple. In addition, reduplicated adjectival forms like *itsy-bitsy* and *teeny-weeny* are features of feminine speech style (Key 1975).

Imprecise intensifiers such as *so*, *gorgeous*, *lovely* and *divine* are claimed as a characteristic of female speech style (Lakoff 1975). Such use reflects the women's social security and their propensity to be more polite than men do. This is inline with Poynton's (1989) observation that women use more evaluative adjectives such as *wonderful* and *gorgeous*, and intensifiers such as *so* and *very*. In addition, Poynton discovers that women tend to use adjectives of approximation such as *about* and *around* instead of the exact number. Swacker (1975) finds similar evidence that women often prefaced definite numerical terms with adjectives of approximation. Thus, it is typical of women to say *around 5 or 6 o'clock* or about *five bucks* instead of saying the exact numbers as men do.

As for polite forms, Lakoff observes three forms of politeness, namely **formality** (of which it distances the speaker both from the addressee and what is being said), **deference** (as how to react to what is said is being left up to the addressee), and **camaradene** (where the speaker is showing sympathy towards the addressee). Lakoff observes that in women's speech, there is also a more frequent expression of emotions such as love and grief, avoidance of angry and hostile expressions. In doing so, women tend to use super polite and euphemistic forms such as *'would you mind...'*, *'I'd appreciate it if ...'*, and *'if you don't mind...'* Lakoff claims that this language use

has the effect 'of submerging [women's] personal identity because there are denied the means of expressing themselves strongly' (in Fasold 1990: 105). Since using strong expletives is considered unladylike, women, therefore, are 'encouraged to use expressions that express triviality' (*ibid*). Along the same line, Eldesky (1976) in her study finds that the respondents attribute the statements containing adjectives such as 'adorable', and expressions such as 'oh dear' and 'my goodness' to women. In addition, Githens' (1991) studies of students' conversation at Lafayette College finds that the use of profanity among women is limited, that, only seven out of the total 2,048 words are 'swear words'. In the same vein, Rosetti (1997) finds that women are by far more polite than men – they use *please, thanks, sorry* and *appreciate(d)* consistently more often than men.

Syntactic-Pragmatic Traits

This syntactic-pragmatic traits category includes indices at the level of utterance or speech act such as the use of hedges, tag questions and direct quotations.

Hedging and deferring are the use of modal verbs such as could, should and may, and other lexical items indicating uncertainty, such as *sort of, kind of, more or less, and it seems like*. The use of these words make utterances less certain or fuzzier. As pointed by Lakoff (1975: 53), hedges are 'words that convey the sense that the speaker is uncertain about what he or she is saying or cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement'.

In addition, the use of hedges may also act as a device to avoid the speaker from making any possible false statements (<http://vidrina.euvfrakfurto.de/sw2/hedge.einf.clem/html>). Giligan (cited in Githens 1991), claims that hedging is also known as conversational mantra. It is used as 'cushion words' to soften the effect of a statement. Prefacing statements with '*I think*', or '*I guess*' is an excuse for personal comments should the listeners think the comments are not appropriate or worthwhile. In addition, Coates (1986) also claims that hedges also function as politeness strategies often used by women in their speech.

Tag questions are mainly used by the speakers 'to make sure their information is correct or to seek agreement' (Azar 1989: 16). Tag questions serve as several functions. First, they function as softening the impact of assertions and to express uncertainty (Lakoff 1975). Lakoff

finds that women always express themselves in a tentative way compared to men. Thus, the use of tag question in ‘*You are coming, aren’t you?*’ reflects women’s tendency to use tag questions with declarative functions. Siegler and Siegler (1976) claim that such use is an indication of uncertainty and lacking confidence. Second, tag questions are used as a part of women’s cooperative style and as a device for sharing the floor. Similarly, Levinson (1983: 305) agrees that tag questions function as turn-taking regulations in conversation. This is also supported by Mahony (in Levinson *op cite*: 447) that it is a device to engage others and elicit a conversational response.

Direct quotation is used when a speaker is reporting what is said by somebody else without paraphrasing the statements. Lakoff observes that when speaking or reporting, women tend to use direct quotations. This is supported by Poynton (1989) that women prefer to use direct quotations rather than paraphrasing.

The Study

Objective

This study attempts to analyse the female speech style as portrayed by authors. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. examine the speech styles of female characters, both adults and children as portrayed in the selected novels;
- ii. find out whether the female speech style (as portrayed) changes over the period of three centuries, i.e, 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

Methodology

Design of the Study

The study is qualitative in nature. Since the purpose of this study is to examine the female speech style as portrayed by writers in literary texts, this study employed a text analysis method involving three novels, representing each century, namely *Anne of Green Gables* (19th Century), *First Term at Malory Towers* (20th Century) and *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (21st Century). This is also a deductive study; it begins with hypotheses or theories, and then searches for evidence to support them.

This study is based on Lakoff's and several other researchers' hypotheses on the characteristics of female speech in conversations. The selected literary texts were examined to see whether the claims and hypotheses are illustrated or portrayed.

Data Collection

Three children novels written in three different centuries were selected in this study. The novels are *Anne of Green Gables* (AGG), written by Lucy M. Montgomery in 1899, *First Term at Malory Towers* (FTMT), written by Enid Blyton in 1946, and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (STW), written by Lisa Fiedler in 2002. All these novels have similarities that they are written by women, and centre on the lives of female teenagers. These novels are written on a pattern of actions as well as verbal, mainly through discussions and conversations, among the characters. In addition, the novels are filled with specific reflections of culture and people in their societies during their time.

Excerpts Selection

Three excerpts containing female speech were randomly chosen from each novel. The excerpts featured conversations of male and female characters as portrayed by the writers. The excerpts were randomly selected to avoid inclination towards the existence of the features of speech styles if they were studied and analyzed beforehand.

Data Analysis

Table 1 below illustrates the framework for analysis which is based on Lakoff's speech characteristics described earlier.

In analyzing the speech styles, a checklist of the conversational style was formed. This checklist, which consisted of all the criteria and styles highlighted previously, was adapted from Lakoff's categories of speech styles. For the purpose of the analysis, the characteristics were tabulated as below:

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Table 1: Checklist Sheet

Novel : _____ Excerpt : _____

CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLE/EVIDENCE	PAGE
LEXICAL TRAITS		
1. Special Lexicon		
2. Adjectives		
3. Super Polite Forms		
4. Expletives		
SYNTACTIC-PRAGMATIC TRAITS	EXAMPLE/EVIDENCE	PAGE
1. Hedges		
2. Tag Questions		
3. Direct Quotations		

Table 2: Lakoff's Characteristics of Female's Speech Styles

SPEECH CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLES
<p>LEXICAL TRAITS</p> <p>Special Lexicon (elaborated use of vocabulary when defining certain objects or situations)</p> <p>Imprecise Intensifiers (emphasizers which have general heightening effect on making the statement stronger)</p> <p>Polite Forms (sharing respect for the person to whom one is talking to by using softening devices)</p> <p>Weak Expletives (words used to express emotions)</p>	<p><i>purplish-blue, itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny</i></p> <p><i>so, much, divine, gorgeous, lovely, adorable, around, about, more or less</i></p> <p><i>Would you mind ..., I'd appreciate it if ..., If you don't mind... Please...</i></p> <p><i>Oh dear ..., My goodness, ... My of my ..</i></p>

SPEECH CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLES
<p>SYNTACTIC-PRAGMATIC TRAITS</p> <p>Hedges (using lexical items indicating uncertainty and politeness)</p> <p>Tag Questions (a question added at the end of a sentence)</p> <p>Direct Quotations (a repetition of speech [of words previously said by another person])</p>	<p>Modal auxiliary (<i>may, might, could</i>) Modal adverbs (<i>perhaps, may be, possibly</i>) Qualifying adjectives (<i>so, very</i>) Egocentric sequences (<i>I believe, I think</i>) Fillers (<i>I see, You know</i>) Conjunctions (<i>and, but, therefore</i>)</p> <p><i>She likes you, <u>doesn't she?</u></i> <i>She's the one, <u>right?</u></i></p> <p><i>"She said to me, "<u>I will be there.</u>" "</i></p>

In the analysis, the speech styles portrayed by the characters were identified from the checklist and examples were quoted from the excerpts as the evidence of the use of the features (as written by the authors).

Findings and Discussions

The findings show that the speeches of the characters in the novels exhibit the features mentioned throughout the three centuries. This suggests that the speech style of the female, as observed, perceived and viewed by the writers, has not changed over time. It seems that up until the present time, women still speak the same way as they had done in the 19th century. The findings are discussed as follows:

Lexical Traits

Special Lexicon

All the three novels contain several instances portrayed by the writers in the use of special lexicon by the female characters. Female characters

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seem to have the tendency to use what is considered as the ‘feminine’ adjectival form of words. The examples are:

<i>Novel</i>	Page No	Evidence
AGG	103	It may make you more <i>addle-pated</i> than ever.
FIMT	75	<i>Jolly clever</i> spider.
STW	100	I’m not speaking <i>petit four-ically</i> .

Imprecise Intensifiers

The analyses show that female characters in these novels use intensifiers in their speech – which is perceived as a typical female speech characteristic. The following utterances present the examples found in the novels:

<i>Novel</i>	Page No	Evidence
AGG	12	There’s risks in <i>pretty near</i> everything...
FIMT	51	You can <i>jolly well</i> do your bit now.
STW	99	... you won’t see a <i>devastatingly gorgeous</i> man.

Super Polite Forms

There is evidence found on the use of super polite forms by female characters in their speech in all the three novels. The examples are as follows:

<i>Novel</i>	Page No	Evidence
AGG	133	I've come to confess, <i>if you please</i> .
FTMT	51	And <i>please</i> tell Mary Lou you're sorry.
STW	8	Salem! <i>Please</i> . I'm desperate!

Weak Expletives

The findings indicate that throughout all the three centuries, women tend to use weak expletives in their speech. Some of the examples found are:

<i>Novel</i>	Page No	Evidence
AGG	133	<i>Why</i> – she'll eat you alive!
FTMT	49	<i>Oh Dear</i> ... I do hope she won't kick up a fuss.
STW	45	<i>Oh</i> , I tell her all the time.

Syntactic-Pragmatic Traits

Tag Questions

The examples below indicate that female characters use question tags in their speech. These tags are used to serve several functions. For example, in AGG, "I love bright red drinks, *don't you?*" (p 106), the question tag is used to seek for agreement from the other party Anne is speaking to. Meanwhile, in FTMT, "So, Darrel said she apologized to me, *did she?*" (p 51), the question tag is used to seek for confirmation. However, if we read it beyond its literal meaning, the use of the question tag is an indication of sarcasm by the speaker. In STW, the tag in "He doesn't look well, *does he?*" (p 98), may serve several functions. First, it may serve as a declarative function. The other may be to seek confirmation or agreement from the other party.

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Hedges

All the female characters in the novels are portrayed to use hedges, namely modal auxiliary, modal adverbs, qualifying adjectives, egocentric adjectives, fillers and conjunction when speaking. Some of the examples are tabulated as the following:

<i>Novel</i>	Page No	Evidence
AGG	11	I thought <i>maybe</i> he was going to the doctor's.
FIMT	49	I <i>never</i> imagined she could be such a spitfire.
STW	98	He looks <i>kind of pale</i> .

Direct Quotations

Analyses show that evidence of the use of direct quotations by the female characters are only found in *Anne of Green Gables* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. The following table indicate the female's style of reporting:

<i>Novel</i>	Page No	Evidence
AGG	11	"But I said, 'no'"
FIMT	–	–
STW	47	"I say 'thus'"

The findings show that the analysed speeches of the characters in the novels do exhibit all but one of the features mentioned throughout the three centuries. There is no evidence found on the use of direct quotation in *First Term at Malory Towers*. However, as mentioned previously, only three excerpts were examined from each novel. This might account for the absence of the evidence of such use in the novel.

There might probably be such use in other speech excerpts that were not examined.

In general, the findings suggest that the speech style of the female, as observed, viewed and perceived by the writers has not changed over time. However, the findings cannot be said altogether conclusive. Since only one novel was chosen to represent each of the century, cautions should be taken before any generalizations can be made as these novels do not represent all the novels available in their genre during their period.

In addition, the study is quite narrow in its scope as not only the number of novels examined is limited, it also concentrates on female writers only. Thus, the speeches crafted are only based on females' view and perception of their own speech styles.

Moreover, the dyads of the conversation are only those of between the female characters. It would be interesting to look at the styles women use when communicating with men, i.e whether the conversational partners will exert any influence on the styles.

Last but not least, it might also be interesting to study the speech styles of female characters in the conversation within and between their distinguished social classes.

Conclusion

In the light of the findings of this study, it is reasonably fair to suggest that female speech style has not changed over time. It is found that the use of the features in female speech style is evident in the female characters' speech in all the three novels.

However, we may want to ask ourselves a question regarding the finding. Why doesn't the style change over the years? Researchers have always argued that the behavioural construct of the society exerts a major influence of the speech. However, the findings seem to point out that although the roles of women in societies have changed considerably, their conversational styles are still perceived the same as in the early days. It seems that although the education and exposure received may change their worldview, women, to a large extent still conforms to the behavioural construct of the society, that is, speaking in the way as they should be speaking. Perhaps, it would not be too much to say that, since they are the ones who conform to the society's expectations and perceptions, they are also responsible in shaping and enhancing these

expectations and perceptions. Perhaps this unchanging speech style, which certainly mark women's characteristic, might be the reason for women being continuously perceived as having inferior status than men, submissive, dependent and subjective. As pointed out by Parsons, Fieze and Ruble (1976: 2-3) .

Each culture has its own prescriptions of sex-role appropriate behaviours. In the process of acculturation, we come to accept these prescriptions about the roles of men and women as fact; we evaluate ourselves and others in terms of these prescriptions; we raise our children to fit the designated patterns; and we punish deviations from the cultural and others, these cultural stereotypes affect men's and women's judgments and beliefs regarding the appropriateness of various roles Women acquire, through a process of socialization, a set of attitudes and beliefs and behaviours which are consistent with the sex roles they are expected to play in society.

Thus, by continuing to speak tentatively, inaccurately, and uncertainly, it seems that women, themselves, are emphasizing their submerging identity in the society, which has always been regarded that way.

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