

Gendered Language: Women's Linguistics in the Workplace

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the way gender is enforced in the workplace through modern language, particularly through speaking patterns and word choice. Topics in this paper include tentative language, rapport talk, report talk, and hesitation. This analysis will be applied to several recorded audio-conversations of business meetings, female management speech patterns, and two contrasting relationships, English and Japanese. These various aspects will be applied to different workplaces, demonstrating that women will always have to consider gender expectations in the workplace, which is displayed through linguistics.

Gender, sexism, and discrimination have been reoccurring topics concerning today's workforce. These concepts are reflected in employees' speaking patterns and word choices, which ultimately affects how employees are seen in the workplace. These concepts also display a certain amount of evidence that there is inequality within the workplace, and it is shown through the differentiated linguistics between men and women. Differentiated linguistics between men and women reveal that they are a product of societal expectations based on gender and sexism. The concept of gender has been a controversial topic that has two opposing sides; one side claims that gender is determined by a human body's reproductive organs, whereas the opposing side argues that gender is a social construct that is forced upon everyone, no matter what people identify as. These arguments are based on the understanding that gender refers to the concepts of masculinity and femininity, which means that these concepts are closely connected to people that have male bodies and female bodies (Ferree & Wade, 2015, p. 5). Most first-world countries only accept gender on a binary system: masculine men and feminine women. Although there are men and women that identify by society's binary system, women still experience discrimination due to their alignment with femininity; because of this, women's speech patterns are expected to fit neatly into "tentative" speaking, thus affecting the acceptable language they are allowed to use in the workplace.

From an early age, men and women are taught that they must fulfill vastly different ends of the binary spectrum, and these expectations are partially fulfilled as men and women adhere to their appropriate speaking styles. Women are supposed to be nurturing, emotional, and personable; these expected qualities define their speaking style as "rapport-talk." This style of speaking is similar to a woman's network of a "small town" in which every person knows everyone else, and more personal information is divulged in order to determine the value of a

particular person. On the other hand, men are meant to live up to masculine qualities, such as being independent, dominant, and logical; because of this, their style of speaking is referred to as “report-talk.” This is the basis of men’s speech, which consists of social networks that are based in a variety of disconnected institutional, intellectual spheres (Ridgeway & Smith-Love, 1999, p. 196). Rapport-talk and report-talk are seen in a various amount of workplaces.

These styles of speech have heavily shaped the way women and men are viewed in the workplace. One reliable method of analyzing the influence of rapport-talk and report-talk within the workplace is by studying the amount of story-telling involved in conversations. According to linguist Janet Holmes, story-telling can be divided into two different sections: “workplace anecdotes” and “working stories.” Workplace anecdotes are identified as “narrative with primarily social functions,” whereas working stories are defined as “narratives whose orientation is more obviously transactional or work-related” (p. 674). Interestingly, Holmes uses audio-recordings to analyze both workplace anecdotes and working stories; only female employees are used in her example for workplace anecdotes. There is one audio-recording in particular (labelled as “Excerpt Two”) that reveals how deeply workplace anecdotes are connected to women’s rapport-talk. In this particular excerpt, there are two women: Penelope and Hettie. Penelope is Hettie’s manager, and they are discussing the fact that they feel negatively about a business meeting. Within this discussion, Hettie appears to be using a narrative that matches a working story; however, she uses a long-winded method in order to provide information about her organization, and her chosen language demonstrates that she has strong feelings regarding the organization that she works for (p. 681-82). Holmes (2009) discusses Hettie’s identity through linguistics further:

Through her linguistic and discursive choice Hettie constructs herself as a competent professional, managing a difficult situation well and with dignity through a variety of strategic discursive, lexical and grammatical choices. These choices also present her as a vulnerable, warm-blooded person with strong feelings, and a story-teller who is responsive to her audience. (p. 682)

Within this audio-recording, Hettie uses rapport-talk to form a workplace anecdote. Although she is discussing work, she casts herself as an individual that cares deeply about the organization, not just an employee that performs duties. She also attaches herself to her manager, creating personal ties, by saying, "We had a horrible meeting." This is another reflection upon rapport-talk.

Hettie's usage of rapport-talk demonstrates a common theme seen among women in the workplace; because of her workplace anecdotes, she is viewed as a woman who displays strong, vulnerable emotions regarding her job. She is also regarded as a woman that is courteous, considerate, and kind to the people that she is speaking to; essentially, these are the preferred rules of femininity, and Hettie displays them well enough in the workplace. However, she is also demeaned for being "long-winded" and descriptive, which ultimately devalues her opinions of the organization; interestingly, if a man showed strong emotions for the organization, his speaking patterns would be classified as informative working stories. As a matter of fact, Holmes indicates this through another recorded audio-conversation of a business meeting; it is labelled as "Excerpt One" and has one man speaking to a group of young graduates. The speaking man's name is Gerry, and he describes the stressful atmosphere and expectations of his previous job. Although he says he "just felt really bad because I failed, I hadn't done a good job . . . You'll all hand in quality of work that you're not happy with, so um be prepared for a little bit of failure and learn from it" (p. 676), he still displays a workplace story because his story "very obviously

serves the interests of the organization for which he works” (p. 677). Interestingly, his emotion serves as purpose; while Hettie is deemed as “long-winded,” he is seen a purposeful and inspirational. This provides insight to the contradictory expectations that society carries in the workplace; even though women are expected to display emotion, it is viewed as a detrimental characteristic, whereas men are not expected to display emotion, but when they do, those emotions are deemed as powerful and purposeful.

Of course, not every woman adapts to the social structure of rapport-talk; however, if a woman does adapt to a typical man's report-talk, it is seen as an unfavorable quality. Louise Mullany, author of *The Handbook of Business Discourse*, dedicates an entire chapter to gender within the workplace; she takes this opportunity to factor in how unfavorable it is for women to adopt more assertive speaking patterns. She includes an example of this through an audio-recording from a business meeting; it includes a conversation between two people, Amy (the female manager) and Karen (Amy's subordinate). This conversation is labeled as “Extract One,” and opinions about Amy are included in “Extract Two” and “Extract Three.” Within “Extract One,” Amy is explaining departmental policy to her employees when Karen interjects with inaccurate information regarding sale calculation time. Amy interjects Karen to let her know by saying, “No it's longer than that Karen.” Karen responds with, “Oh [pause] right.” Amy responds, emphasizing that Karen is wrong: “It's longer” (p. 219). This conversation reveals a direct challenge to Karen's inaccurate statements; interestingly, Mullany states that she displays a stereotypically masculine speech style; however, because she repeats herself, it seems as though she remembers her place first. Although Amy clearly distances herself from rapport-talk, she and Karen have both experienced the same pressing expectations that comes with being a woman: displaying uncertainty. Both women display uncertainty, but their methods of doing so

are quite different. Karen follows conventional speaking patterns for feminine women in “Extract One”; she displays tentative language by pausing briefly after Amy corrects her; interestingly, tentative language is typically used to demonstrate uncertainty and insecurity, and it allows for someone (usually a man) to interject with the knowledge necessary to fill in the gaps (Brouwer, Gerritsen, & Hann, 1979, p. 34). However, Amy is a female manager with that particular knowledge, and she feels like it is necessary to repeat that the sale calculation time is longer. In a way, Amy clings closer to her speaking pattern of report-talk by repeating her statement; it is her way of justifying her interjections and “rudeness” that she uses with Karen.

In “Extract Two,” Karen gives her opinion about Amy: “Amy is a very strong character, very straightforward . . . erm . . . says what she means, is very direct, and it can be quite an overpowering experience talking to her.” Kelly, Amy’s equal, also shares her thoughts about Amy: “Females are more caring generally [pause], naturally more nurturing. They’re definitely got certain qualities that are different to men but some females can be real tyrants” (Mullany, 2009, p. 219). Within these extracts, two things are established: women should be emotional and always take their listener’s feelings into consideration. This societal expectation is clearly considered a strong factor within the workplace; however, if any woman adapts a more straightforward pattern of speech, they are automatically written off as rude, mean, and less of a woman. Mullany (2009) confirms this thought process to be prevalent:

After the interview officially finished, Kelly acknowledged that she had been referring to Amy when talking of female ‘tyrants.’ She presents Amy as being in opposition with expectations for a ‘natural’ female manager who is more ‘nurturing.’ There is clear evidence in both extracts of negative evaluation of Amy for going against the expected gendered norm. Extract 2 aptly illustrates how this relates directly to Amy’s speech style,

thus providing explicit evidence of the gendered language ideology. These negative attitudes and evaluations are wholly representative of the manner in which Amy was perceived within this business by both her female and male colleagues. (p. 219)

Even though their distaste for Amy is evident, Kelly and Karen display tentative language patterns while speaking about her in different ways. Kelly demonstrates this by hesitating before going on to call some female managers “tyrants”; in this instance, she is allowing other people to fill in the gaps for her. She is unsure whether or not she should name Amy specifically, so she uses the word “some” to signify that she has someone in mind. Likewise, Karen hesitates throughout her extract; while her word choice is complimentary, her speaking pattern exhibits hesitancy, which in turn, shows that she is unsure how to exactly describe her boss. Furthermore, she struggles between two choices: answering honestly with true emotion, or answering dishonestly without showing any form of disagreement with her boss’ attitude. Karen must decide which expectations of a working woman she must fulfill: should she exhibit clear, honest emotion as a woman, or should she be passive within her role as an employed subordinate? Her tentative language patterns reveal her discomfort and uncertainty. Ultimately, Karen decides to retract back to her expected speaking pattern of rapport-talk, demonstrating that knowing someone personally should be the first factor considered while making a statement.

The expectation for women to have tentative language within rapport-talk does is not contained to just English-speaking workplaces; these concepts are also prevalent in Japanese-speaking workplaces. According to Claude-Eve Dubuc (2012), Japanese female managers typically find themselves in contradicting positions; they must prove themselves to be “competent and capable businesspersons” while not stepping too far from the mold of socio-cultural norms and expectations towards women (p. 293). Like English-speaking workplaces,



women in Japan workplaces have a distinct feminine speech characterized by: the use of exclusively female expressions, avoidance of formalistic words, high frequency of respectful expressions, politeness and courtesy, roundabout and tentative speech patterns, using a high-pitched voice, repetitive speech, and high levels of adjective use (p. 294). In order to understand the full impact of expectations of feminine women within the Japanese workplace, Dubuc (2012) conducted studies within four field sites Tokyo over a one-year period (2006-2007); certain characteristics set these field sites apart: (1) an advertisement company, which had a hierarchical and informal workplace; (2) a home electronics maker, which had the absence of both hierarchy and formality; (3) a financial group, which was both highly hierarchical and formal; and (4) a car maker, in which hierarchy and formality existed, but the manager tried to minimize hierarchical distinctions (p. 296-297). The speech patterns Dubuc analyzes are traditional linguistic markers of femininity and masculinity, order giving, softening strategies, and informality/politeness. Her results were very telling; none of the four participants (female managers) used masculine forms, with the exception of interactional contexts, such as jokes or quotes. The four female managers held no masculinization in their speech; in addition, they did not use strongly marked feminine speech forms. Although softer feminine markers were used from time to time. Interestingly, one previous female manager from an older generation in the advertisement company often used femininity markers; because of this, she was heavily criticized by coworkers and described as too emotional (p. 298).

Order giving presented a challenge to the female managers; while it is an inevitable part of their occupations, they still feel the pressure to live up to the expectations forced upon women. All four female managers place highly values upon non-assertive language, and each speaker completely avoids using strong Japanese imperatives (p. 301). Yamamoto (the manager of the

advertisement company) often uses apologies and minimizers, such as the adverb “chotto,” which translates to “little,” or “somewhat.” This adverb is emphasized in her question-like requests: “[Myoji]-chan, gomen, chotto goannai shite kureru?” (p. 299) This sentence translates to, “[Surname]-chan, sorry, could you (do me the favor of) show(ing) them the way?” This demonstrates Yamamoto’s ability to manipulate the Japanese language through word choice; while she avoids masculine and feminine forms, she still manages to speak in a non-assertive, non-demanding way. Her method, along with the other managers’ methods, also helped them remain polite and informal. While pointing out mistakes or omissions, they used open statements known as tag questions and qualifying phrases, making their speaking patterns more tentative and distant; in order to do this, they used the phrases “I think,” or, “I feel,” which serves as way to render statements less face-threatening (p. 302).

Even though English and Japanese are highly contrasting languages, women in the workplace are still expected to embrace tentative language patterns, along with using word choice to support the notion of rapport-talk. In English-speaking workplaces, women use hesitation in order to display uncertainty, whereas Japanese-speaking women employees use apologies and minimizers. Both groups of women also strategically use tentative language patterns in order to fulfill the feminine expectations forced upon them. While it seems that women are becoming more equal in the workforce, it is important to note that these linguistic qualities continue to enforce inequalities and unfair expectations; this is not exclusive to one language, culture, or workplace.

## References

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