

## Interaction and “Standard English”: Gender Matters

### Abstract

This paper examines the influence of existing male and female language stereotypes in “Standard English” and it also focuses on specific genres: verbal activity types, with specific social roles assigned for participants. Conversation – an informal, private genre of talk – is in its focus. The goal is to contribute to a better understanding of the division of conversational labor, male-female distinct “interactional styles”, politeness strategies used by women and men.

**Keywords:** gender; gender language stereotypes; social roles, interactional styles.

### Introduction

In this article I aim to bring together new theoretical work on gender from sociolinguistics and feminist linguistics with new theorising of existing male and female language stereotypes. (1) I aim to clear some theoretical space for thinking about both the terms gender and language stereotypes, and thus much of the paper is given over to a critique of theorising on this subject. In my opinion we need a more flexible and complex model of gender and language stereotypes. Theorists in gender and language research cannot continue to discuss gender and language stereotypes simply in terms of the differential linguistic behaviour of males and females as groups; we need to be able to analyse the various language strategies which gendered and classed women and men adopt in particular circumstances and with particular goals and interests. (2) In terms of the gender analysis of specific genres, I would argue that we need several analytical changes: firstly, we need to see any specific genre as a verbal activity type, with specific social roles assigned for participants; secondly, it should be seen within the context of conversational labor division, male-female distinct “interactional styles, rather than as simply something which is the product of individual speakers. And finally, we need to be aware that there may be conflicts over the meanings of politeness strategies used by women and men. (3) By focusing on the analysis of an incident in which I was involved, in the final part of this article, I try to formulate the ways in which I think the theorising of gender and language stereotypes might proceed.

### 1. Gender and Language Stereotypes: Notions

Gender has begun to be theorised in more productive ways, moving away from a reliance on binary oppositions and global statements about the behaviour of all men and all women, to more nuanced and mitigated statements about certain groups of women or men in particular circumstances, who negotiate within certain parameters of permissible or socially sanctioned behaviour (Coates & Cameron, 1988; Johnson & Meinhof, 1997; Bergvall, Bing & Freed, 1996). Rather than seeing gender as a possession or set of behaviours which is imposed upon the individual by social stereotypes, as many essentialist theorists have done so far, (Butler, 1990) many social linguists have now moved to a position where they view gender as something which is enacted or performed, and thus as a potential site of struggle over perceived restrictions in roles (Crawford, 1995).

In fact, when mentioning gender language stereotypes, it is essential to define (a) our target groups, and (b) what we mean by stereotypes, as there may be different understandings (Advisory Committee, EU, 2010).

(a) Women, like men are not a homogeneous group. There are women and men from different groups, ages, social or educational levels, nationalities, sexual orientations, with different apprehension and motivations. There are business women, women working in the home, women working in the field of research and women as senior managers. There are women and men with different ways of living. They may be from different cultures, religions, migrant backgrounds, or who are ethnic minorities, disadvantaged, or (dis)abled. This heterogeneity makes it a challenge to address these different groups with specific and efficient measures.

(b) The notion of stereotypes is quite complex. Stereotypes are beliefs adopted in advance; concerning characteristics of an individual, a group or an object and emphasising the fact of not taking into account the individual traits. Stereotypes are simplifications, of social origin. They are persistent, subjective, being transmitted from generation to generation. Some may be universal, but in general, stereotypes are known, used and transmitted inside a certain group or a certain culture. There are gender stereotypes, but also ethnic or national stereotypes and they may also interfere with one another.

Stereotypes also perform the justifying role: they justify our behaviour and the social system or the behaviour of a social group with which we identify ourselves. Stereotypes are not essentially negative. They actually help us in understanding complicated processes ruling the social world, reduce uncertainty and provide a sense of security.

In the present context, it is important to address the fact that gender stereotypes not only contribute to the status quo in terms of women’s and men’s roles, but also promote an asymmetrical vision of women and men in society. Furthermore, they are one of the most persistent causes of inequality between women and men in all spheres and at all stages of life, influencing their choices in education, and in their professional and private life.

Paying regard to the diversity of women, and with the objective to eliminate complex and versatile stereotyping in relation to gender, the media, conscious of its widespread power to shape public opinion, should respect and account for the identities, situations and experiences of various women within society.

Within this view, we should be concerned less with analysing individual linguistic acts between individual (gendered) speakers than with the analysis of a community based perspective on gender and linguistic performance. This, in the case of gender language stereotypes, must therefore involve language strategies which have different functions and meanings for different groups of people.

### 1.1. Gender and “Standard English”

Like all languages, English is not homogeneous. It varies according to the - circumstances in which it is spoken or written. To put it another way, the variety of English used depends on where it is being used, why, when, how and, of course, who by. A single individual's language will vary according to the needs of the social context, in terms of level of formality required by the relationship between speaker and hearer and what they are talking about, as well as other aspects of the social setting. The English you might use in a news broadcast is very different from the English you would use to gossip about the last film you saw or, for that matter, to conduct a lecture on astrophysics (Talbot, 2011).

Sociolinguistic studies have long observed that women use more forms of standard language than men, so much so that the stereotype of women's hypercorrect language has emerged as somewhat of a universal principle in the field. By extension, sociolinguists have also recognized women's important role in the initiation and dissemination of language change. Earlier studies identified women as the leaders of linguistic changes that spread from above the level of public consciousness and involved new prestige forms emanating from the upper ranks of the social strata. In contrast, men were found to lead changes in vernacular forms spreading below the level of public awareness.

In a substantial number of empirical investigations outside the context of organizations, the language used by men and women has been shown to differ in meaningful ways. For example, some investigations (Mulac, Bradac & Gibbons, 2001) have shown that men tend to use more references to quantity than women, and revealed that men employ more judgmental adjectives (e.g. “Working can be a drag”). On the other hand, some studies have demonstrated that women use more intensive adverbs (e.g. “This is really hard”) and references to emotions (e.g. “If he loved what he was doing . . .”). Although such language differences are often found, they should not be thought of as “markers” of gender whose presence unerringly points to the gender of the speaker. Instead, they function as gender-linked “tendencies” in ‘Standard English’ (Smith, 1985) to favor certain linguistic features over others.

According to Trudgill (Trudgill, 1972) women use the ‘Standard’ variants more often than men because they are more status conscious. This is because they are less secure socially and more likely to be judged on appearances than men. Men, on the other hand, are judged by what they do, so that they are not under pressure to use the prestige variants. Moreover, the non-Standard forms found in the vernacular, used predominantly by the working class, have masculine connotations which motivate men to use them, but not women. To account for the over- and under-reporting that he discovered in his informants' self-evaluations, Trudgill drew upon Labov's distinction between overt and covert prestige (Labov, 1990). Women liked to think they used forms associated with Standard forms, and tended to report that they did more often than was actually the case. This showed their desire for overt prestige. Men, on the other hand, liked to think they used the vernacular more than they actually did. They found the non-Standard forms carried another, hidden land of status, or covert prestige.

For example, there are cases in which the woman has self-corrected herself as a show of sensitivity toward standard speech, while the men show no such effort. According to Montgomery (Montgomery, 1986), self-correction can be defined as the various ways utterances are reworked in the process of uttering them:

Jody: *Ummm. I have to do gas...uh...call Mira and get them to do the gas...uhh...electricity...water...What else is there? I don't know.*

Jody: *Telephone. Everything has to be about six. I mean...I get six bills every month...so I guess all the bills have to be...*

Studies in hyper-correction and covert prestige are generally concerned with sex in relation to social class (Milroy 1980). In the recorded sample, however, the three participants are of equal social status, all working at the same university as language teachers. I cannot, therefore, make the claim that Jody's self-corrections are a reflection of being status-conscious. A more likely explanation is that her standard language use stems from the social roles that are expected from men and women, and the behavior patterns that fit those assumptions. As Trudgill states, women's language is not only different, it is ‘better,’ and is a ‘reflection of the fact that, generally speaking, more ‘correct’ social behavior is expected of women’ (Trudgill, 1972).

Talbot points out that there are perceptible differences in the Standard pronunciation patterns of men and women (Talbot, 2011). While findings have differed, the most consistent has been that women's speech, overall, tends to contain more Standard forms than men's. It has proved unsatisfactory to account for these differences in terms of class and notions of status consciousness, but it is clear that pronunciation is used to signal gender. In addition to norms and expectations about gendered behavior, this signaling of gender is

certainly tied up with community loyalties and work patterns in highly complex ways. In some localities, there are certain local forms that are used markedly more by the men, both working-class and middle-class, than by their female counterparts. According to Talbot (Talbot, 2011: 28), in Tyneside - an area in the north-east of England with a strong regional identity - there are two ways of pronouncing the consonant (k) between two vowels in a word such as local; there is the Standard variant [k] and the local vernacular variant, a glottal stop [ʔ]. It would seem that this local variant [ʔ] contributes in a small way to the establishment of masculine identities in Tyneside. Whereas women use the standard variant.

## **2. Telling Stories: Gender Aspects**

One of the things that people recurrently do in conversation is telling stories and, as Sacks (Sacks, 1995: 222) puts it, a “bland fact” about stories is that they require more than one utterance to tell. Specifically, how can a teller secure an extended turn-at-talk within which a story can be told? But, as Sacks notes, it is possible also to turn things around and see stories not as the source of an interactional problem but rather as themselves a solution. A story can be seen as a package or format which affords its speaker unique opportunities for delivering what it is she has to say. Sacks (Sacks, 1995: 222-8) points out that, if stories are to function in this way as a solution to the interactional problem of how to produce an extended, multi-unit turn-at-talk, they must be recognizable as stories to their recipients. Furthermore, it’s no good if they are recognizable as stories only retrospectively (at their completion for instance). Rather, in order to serve as solutions, the story format must be recognizable before the speaker reaches a first point of possible completion. So this raises the question of what it is about a story that makes it recognizable as such.

The interactional environment in which stories emerge can be examined not only in relation to the taking of turns but also to the organization of sequences. The embedding of stories in a particular interactional environment has a number of other important dimensions. For instance, a story-telling is significantly shaped by the way in which knowledge of the events being talked about is distributed among the co-participants. Sacks drew attention to one particularly relevant aspect of this in his discussion of how tellers position themselves in relation to the events they talk about - showing, that is, how they know a story. Whether the teller witnessed the events, participated in them, heard about them from a friend has a range of consequences for how the story is told. For example, a speaker may recurrently find himself or herself telling a story that his or her spouse has already heard or otherwise talking about events in which his or her spouse also participated. Telling a story in the company of another participant who already knows the details of what is being told appears to conflict with a basic principle of recipient design: “do not tell others what they already know.” Looked at from the other side - that of the recipient - this recurrent situation means that a spouse may find himself or herself listening to a story which he or she already knows (Sidnell, 2010).

### **2.1. Conversation: Genre of Talk**

The term ‘conversation’ is sometimes used, very loosely, to refer to spoken language, talk in general. According to Mary Talbot a conversational genre as a genre is still very broad, but it is characterized by a friendly and informal relationship between participants. At its most informal and relaxed Talbot calls it chatting or gossiping. The most important thing about chatting is not so much what is being talked about as the fact that talk is taking place at all. Chatting is friendly talk, talk for its own sake (in Britain, the mainstay of such talk is the weather). What all conversation is about is keeping the channel of communication open (known as the phatic function of language). When people engage in conversation they do so in a fairly symmetrical way. The ebb and flow of talk from one person to another is one of its defining characteristics, even between people with very different social positions, such as teacher and pupil. If they are in conversation, they each have a share of the talk (Talbot, 2011: 75-76).

Talbot thinks about conversation as private, but it occurs in public places as well. We may engage in conversations in shops, which are public places, with shop assistants, who are probably strangers to us. For most people, conversation is an important part of relationships at work. So, all in all, as Talbot claims, the public-private distinction is a difficult one to sustain. It is not a clear-cut thing, but a matter of degree. However, conversation is distinct from public kinds of talk in important ways (Talbot, 2011).

We have established the phatic function of conversation as its most important feature. This does not mean that what’s talked about is entirely irrelevant. Rebekah Johnson, identifies distinct kinds of conversation among family members, which are viewed as different varieties of family interaction, e.g. including dinnertime telling your day sequences, Father knows best sequences, and talking through another. Through patterns such as these, we can see the ways that family members use discursive strategies to display power, reinforce connection, and accomplish their communicative goals. These are ‘house-talk’, occupational talk which is the family’s equivalent of ‘talking shop’; ‘scandal’, which involves the verbal policing of other people’s behaviour (Johnson, 1997). What they have in common is a sharing of personal experience in conversation.

### **2.2. Gender Social Roles and Interactional Styles**

People constantly create and renegotiate their relationships with each other in the process of interacting, via conversation moves that make claims to equality, inequality, solidarity, or detachment. But there are communicative situations in which social roles are relatively fixed in advance, and in which people are expected

to use and interpret conversation in relatively pre-set ways. Sometimes, conversation roles are even codified in books or explained overtly. For example, foreign-language textbooks may include explanations of the linguistic and other behaviors expected for the roles in which students may be using the language, contrasting how students respond to teachers in different countries, or discussing what is expected of hosts and guests. A common, usually pre-set pair of conversation roles consists of those of server and client. People who train for serving jobs at fast-food restaurants are sometimes told exactly what to say to clients in what order, and what style to adopt if talk outside the “script” is required. Another such relationship is that of husband and wife; another is that of parent and child. People who find themselves in social roles that involve more or less predefined ways of interacting are not thereby forced to act in those ways (Johnstone, 2011: 139-140). In some situations, it may be unclear to one or more of the participants what role is being assumed by others, or what roles they should themselves adopt, and a person can be acting in more than one role, each associated with a different “style” or a different “frame” for understanding what is going on.

American linguist Deborah Tannen has brought the notion of men and women having distinct styles of interaction to a wide audience in a series of books in the self-help genre (Tannen 1986, 1990, 1995). She makes use of a variety of binary oppositions to characterize women’s and men’s different styles of talk: sympathy-problem-solving; rapport-report; listening-lecturing; private-public; connection-status etc.

For most men, continues Tannen, conversations can be rather different. They can be highly competitive. Men tend to use conversations as arenas for negotiating and maintaining status, so that they tend to involve exhibitions of knowledge and skill, performances intended to get attention and keep it. Jokes, storytelling and the imparting of information are important. Men are focused on report rather than rapport. Conversations are about imparting information, talking for a purpose, demonstrating expertise. Tannen observes that the same men who are outspoken and talkative in groups become quiet and uncommunicative at home, or so their wives complain. In Tannen’s account of the contrasting conversational styles of women and men, differences in style lead to minor, but regular, difficulties among couples. Many couples find one another irritating; Tannen accounts for this irritation in terms of unsatisfactory conversational interaction. According to this body of research on male and female conversational styles, women tend to focus on rapport and the affective, supportive function of conversation; broadly speaking, to be oriented towards the interpersonal. Men on the other hand tend to focus on report and the informational function of conversation. When we talk about the function of a particular stretch of talk, we have to bear in mind that language is multifunctional. People never do just one thing at a time with it. Even the biggest show-off has to show off about something (Tannen 1986, 1990, 1995).

Blum-Kulka (Blum-Kulka, 1997) and Ochs and Taylor (Ochs and Taylor, 1992a, 1992b, 2001) have examined patterns in which family members relate narratives of the day’s activities to one another, often at the dinner table. Blum-Kulka studied dinnertime discourse among Israeli and Jewish American families, looking at how the particular speech event of dinner talk is a site for socialization into pragmatics and communication skills. She looked at how narrative events, such as the telling of the events of the day, occurred and found that family dinner table narratives are jointly constructed, with a high amount of collaboration from most members. Blum-Kulka found that mothers in Israeli families were more active in initiating stories than fathers, but in American families, fathers contributed more to talk, generally, including narrative initiation (Blum-Kulka, 1997).

Within the ritual of telling your day, Blum-Kulka noted that families must balance issues of power and solidarity. The speech event of family dinner itself, and narratives in particular, are meant to enhance family solidarity or, as one parent in her study put it, “strengthen the sense of family” (Blum-Kulka, 1997: 144). Parents, in the hierarchical position (of control), used more direct style control acts. Yet the informality of the event of dinner talk speaks to solidarity building.

Ochs and Taylor looked at the way in which mothers and fathers often take on specific roles in family conversations. In their studies, Ochs and Taylor found that mothers often are introducers of a topic, primarily asking the children to relate something to their fathers. The fathers then become evaluators, or problematizers, while the children are both the protagonists of the stories they are being urged to tell, and are problematizees, or the ones being judged or evaluated. This shows a clear family power structure, where the father, as the main problematizer, is at the top. The children are at the bottom of the power hierarchy, and the mother is somewhere in the middle. At times, the mother also problematizes what the children have done, but she often finds herself the problematizee, being criticized for her actions by the father, and sometimes even by the children (Ochs and Taylor, 1992a).

An example of this is given by Ochs and Taylor (Ochs and Taylor, 2001: 434) at the dinner table between a mother (Mom), a father (Dad), and a 5-year-old girl (Jodie), at the very beginning of the dinner conversation:

1 Mom: ((to Jodie)) *oh:: You know what? You wanna tell Daddy what happened to you today? =*

2 Dad: ((looking up and off)) *=Tell me everything that happened from the moment you went in – until:*

3 Jodie: *I got a sho::t? =*

4 Dad: *=EH((gasping)) what? ((frowning))*

5 Jodie: I got a sho::t  
 6 Dad: *no*  
 7 Jodie: ((*nods yes, facing Dad*))  
 8 Dad: ((*shaking head no*)) – *Couldn't be*  
 . . . (lines skipped)  
 9 Jodie: *I just went to the doctor and I got a shot*  
 10 Dad: ((*shaking head no*)) *I don't believe it*  
 11 Jodie: ri:??ly:: . . .

Mom sets up the conversation, Jodie is the protagonist, the principal character of the story, and the one being set up for scrutiny. Dad is the problematizer, whose narrative role is as a co-narrator “who renders an action, condition, thought, or feeling of a protagonist or a co-narrator problematic, or possibly so” (Ochs and Taylor, 2001: 439).

We can conclude, family interaction is an ongoing struggle simultaneously for power and connection, as well as a continuing negotiation of gender identities and roles. In these ways, family interaction mirrors human interaction in general. As a microcosm of the larger society, the family unit can be an important resource of spoken interaction for discourse analysts for better understanding human interaction and communicative conflict.

### 3. Politeness: Gender Matters

One influential line of research about how storytelling is shaped by audience has to do with linguistic “politeness”. Politeness, in this technical sense of the term, refers to the ways in which speakers adapt (or fail to adapt) to the fact that their interlocutors, actual or imagined, have social needs like their own. Politeness is one of the main reasons for which people are often indirect, not saying precisely what they mean but implying it. Politeness, in this sense, is much more pervasive and more necessary than the formal etiquette involved in making introductions correctly or using the correct eating utensils (Johnstone, 2011: 145).

People establish friendship partly by signalling closeness with, and mutual interest in, one another. This kind of friendly behaviour is sometimes called being ‘positively polite’ (Talbot, 2011). Positive politeness involves people in attention to one another’s ‘positive face’: their need to be liked, to be approved of. The term is not an evaluative one. It is called positive politeness to distinguish it from the kind of politeness common both among strangers and from subordinates, that attends to ‘negative face’: people’s need for freedom from being harassed and imposed upon. The distinction is between friendly behaviour and respectful behaviour. The latter - the negative kind - is probably more familiar as ‘being polite’, being closer to our everyday-language notion of politeness. In fact, though, both positive and negative kinds of politeness make up the vital social lubricants that keep people talking. After all, signalling friendship is every bit as important as signalling respect (Talbot, 2011: 84).

The giving of compliments is one of the most interesting, and perhaps most obvious, ways of being positively polite during the storytelling process. Complimenting is a way of making the recipient feel interesting, valued, approved of.

Scientists claim that men and women have different ways of going about being friendly. Women have been found to use a lot of politeness strategies, including in friendly conversation (Holmes, 1997). They are mostly of the positive variety: hedges, boosters and compliments. Hedging and boosting devices are modal elements; that is, elements that modify the force of a statement, either weakening it or intensifying it. We use hedges to avoid stating things categorically, to avoid sounding too dogmatic and sure of ourselves. Examples are **sort of, rather, a bit, kind of, about**. Tag questions (**isn't it?, can't we?**, etc.) are sometimes used as hedges. Boosters are ways of adding friendly enthusiasm, expressing intense interest. Examples are **really** and **so**. Compliments between women consolidate solidarity between speaker and addressee. They function as social lubricants, creating or maintaining rapport, as in the example below (Talbot, 2011). Two strangers, meeting after the weekend, exchange complimentary remarks about the beneficial effect of a little, long-overdue English sunshine on their pale English faces:

Glickstein: *Youareso verygood-looking, aren'tyou?*(This caused a silence between them)...*What's your name?*

Rachel: *Sylvie...Sylvie Bonaire*

The way compliments function and the way they are perceived by their recipients are affected by the power relationship between complimenter and recipient, and also by what genre of interaction they are engaging in.

### Conclusions

In this article we have reviewed a range of studies concerned with gender storytelling in conversation. Following on Sack’s and Talbot’s pioneering works in this area, gender conversation analysts have shown that stories emerge within a larger context of ongoing talk which shapes the details of their design and construction. Moreover, stories are told to accomplish various sorts of action in conversation which employ various language politeness strategies that gendered and classed women and men adopt in particular circumstances and with particular goals and interests.

From the literature on gender interaction and research on the language strategies used by males and females to co-construct identities and establish routines, several patterns emerge. Like any group of people who have regular communication, families develop unique routines and ways of interacting. The ways family members negotiate interactional goals, power dynamics, and the co-construction of one another's identities is reflective of the ways people communicate in every day speech events in all situations. Gender interaction in families mirrors human interaction in general. As a microcosm of the larger society, the family unit can be an important resource of spoken interaction for conversation analysts to better understand human interaction and communicative conflict.

### **Biography**

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