



GENDER DIFFERENCES OF COMMUNICATION STYLES

H. Sh. Gafforov

Samarkand Campus of ISFT Institute Acting Associate Professor,
Department of “Social and Humanitarian” Sciences,
Qurgoshin1905@gmail.com

Abstract:

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of gender differences in speech, drawing from sociolinguistic, psychological, and cross-cultural studies. It examines how men and women differ in their verbal communication styles, including the use of vocabulary, tone, interruptions, and non-verbal cues such as body language and eye contact. The role of socialization, power dynamics, and cultural expectations in shaping these differences is discussed, alongside how these patterns influence gender identity and professional interactions. The article also highlights the limitations of essentialist views on gendered speech, emphasizing the fluidity of communication behaviors across contexts and cultures.

Keywords: Gender Differences in Speech, Sociolinguistics, Communication Styles, Power Dynamics, Non-verbal Communication, Language and Gender, Verbal Interaction, Interruptions

Introduction

Gender differences in speech have been a subject of sociolinguistic inquiry for decades. From the early works of Robin Lakoff to contemporary gender theorists, researchers have investigated how men and women use language differently, and why. These differences are often framed in terms of social expectations and power dynamics, with speech reflecting broader gender roles in society. This article seeks to explore the multifaceted ways in which gender influences speech, focusing on verbal and non-verbal communication, interruptions, and cultural contexts.

One of the earliest models to address gender differences in language was Robin Lakoff's (1975) deficit model, which suggested that women's speech is less assertive and more tentative compared to men's [1]. Lakoff argued that this difference is a result of women's subordinate position in society, leading them to adopt linguistic features such as hedging, tag questions, and politeness strategies.

In contrast, the dominance model, introduced by Dale Spender (1980) and other scholars, argues that gendered speech patterns reflect broader power imbalances between men and women. According to this view, men dominate conversations, often





interrupting and steering discussions in their favor, while women's speech is marginalized [2].

Deborah Tannen (1990) proposed the difference model, which suggests that men and women are socialized into different "cultures" of speech from a young age. This model emphasizes that men and women have distinct communication goals—men use language to assert dominance and independence, while women use it to foster relationships and create empathy.

Recent research has moved beyond these early models [3], acknowledging the variability and fluidity of gendered speech across different social contexts. Researchers like Cameron (2007) emphasize that there is no single way to define how men and women speak; instead, gender is performed differently depending on the situation, and speech patterns are influenced by factors such as race, class, and age. Studies have consistently found phonetic differences between male and female speakers. Women are more likely to use standard, prestige forms of speech, while men often use vernacular or non-standard forms to express solidarity or toughness. Phonetic studies also suggest that women's speech tends to be more precise, with clearer enunciation and softer intonation patterns, especially in formal settings [4].

Lexical differences between men and women have been well-documented. Women are generally found to use a wider range of color terms and descriptive adjectives, reflecting their role in social interactions centered around relationships and emotions. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to use language related to objects, tools, and competitive activities.

Another area of difference lies in the use of intensifiers (e.g., "really," "so," "very") and modifiers (e.g., "just," "sort of," "kind of") [4]. Women tend to use these features more frequently than men, often as a means of softening statements or reducing the potential for conflict. This is tied to societal expectations that women should avoid appearing too assertive or confrontational.

One of the most widely discussed aspects of gender differences in speech is the distinction between cooperative and competitive communication styles. Research suggests that women's speech is more collaborative, with a focus on building rapport and maintaining harmony in conversation. Women are more likely to use inclusive language, ask questions to engage others, and provide verbal and non-verbal support through backchanneling (e.g., nodding, saying "mm-hmm").

In contrast, men are more likely to engage in competitive speech, using language to assert authority, control the topic, and display knowledge. This can manifest in more direct, authoritative statements, as well as a greater tendency to interrupt or challenge the speaker [4].





Women's speech is often associated with a higher degree of politeness. This includes the use of indirect requests, mitigation strategies, and a tendency to avoid confrontational language. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to use blunt, direct language, particularly in contexts where they perceive the need to establish dominance.

Gender differences also extend to the use of humor [5]. Studies suggest that men are more likely to use humor as a way of establishing social hierarchies, often employing sarcasm, irony, or jokes that challenge others. Women, conversely, use humor to foster connections, often opting for self-deprecating humor or jokes that emphasize shared experiences.

One of the key markers of gender differences in speech is the frequency and nature of interruptions. Research indicates that men interrupt more often than women, particularly in mixed-gender conversations. These interruptions are often seen as an assertion of dominance, signaling control over the conversational floor.

Not all interruptions are the same. Sociolinguists distinguish between "supportive" interruptions, which are intended to affirm or encourage the speaker, and "disruptive" interruptions [6], which aim to change the subject or undermine the speaker's position. Women are more likely to engage in supportive interruptions, while men more frequently use disruptive interruptions [10].

Non-verbal communication is another area where gender differences are pronounced. Women are more likely to use gestures that emphasize inclusivity, such as leaning forward, maintaining eye contact, and nodding. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to use expansive gestures, occupy more physical space, and engage in less direct eye contact, particularly in competitive or formal settings [7].

Studies show that women tend to use more expressive facial gestures and maintain eye contact more consistently in conversations. This is often interpreted as a reflection of women's focus on relational communication. Men, however, are more likely to use minimal facial expressions and avoid prolonged eye contact, especially in situations involving conflict or authority.

Gender differences in speech are not uniform across cultures [8]. In some societies, gendered language is more rigidly defined, with men and women expected to adhere to distinct speech styles. In Japan, for instance, there are specific linguistic markers associated with women's speech, such as the use of more polite and deferential forms. In contrast, in some indigenous cultures, gender differences in speech are minimal or non-existent, reflecting more egalitarian social structures.

In professional settings, gender differences in speech can have significant implications for leadership and career advancement. Studies suggest that women in leadership





positions are often expected to balance assertiveness with warmth, a double bind that does not apply to male leaders. Women who use authoritative, “masculine” speech patterns may be perceived as too aggressive, while those who use “feminine” speech may be seen as lacking authority.

Gendered expectations of speech also influence how men and women are perceived in the workplace. Research indicates that men’s speech is more likely to be viewed as competent and authoritative, while women’s speech, particularly if it includes features such as hedging or politeness strategies, may be judged as less professional or confident [9].

Gender differences in speech are influenced by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and psychological factors. While certain patterns, such as the use of politeness strategies or differences in interruption behavior, are well-documented, it is important to recognize the fluidity of these differences. Gendered speech is not fixed; it changes across contexts, cultures, and social groups. Future research will benefit from an intersectional approach, considering how gender interacts with other social identities to shape communication.

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