

## DO TEENAGERS KNOW HOW TO DEMONSTRATE SEX DIFFERENCES GRAMMATICALLY?

Mary Louise Willbrand and Norman Elliott

University of Utah

Galvin and Brommel (1982), claim that part of the sexual distinctions learned in the family are communication behaviors. Sexually bound roles determine in part how a person responds and performs communicatively and thus role conceptions may limit communicative competence. Thus it might be expected that discourse among adults of different sexes would indicate different communication competence. During the past decade numerous articles and books have been devoted to the topic of gender differences in the language. A review of the literature indicates that the majority of publications repeat the same information. The statements are usually general and a few repeated examples are selected to prove a point - that the language in our culture perpetuates the unequal status of women. (Comprehensive reviews of literature are in Gersoni-Stavn, 1974; Henley and Thorne, 1975; Key, 1975; Thorne and Henley, 1975). The discussions of language are primarily concentrated around two areas: language about women and language used by women. This paper is concerned with the language used by women.

Gersoni-Stavn (1974) traces the early expression of these differences to Paul who wrote in 1 Corinthians 11: ". . . But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." And she said that this ideology is not a relic of the past rather it has become such common thinking that today it is unconsciously the basis of our behaviors. If such ideology has become a societal value, then we might expect an influence on role perceptions.

After a review of other investigators' information, Patton and Ritter (1976) concluded that verbal interaction reflects the differences. They categorized the differences into expressions of dominance, levels of self disclosure and expression of feelings.

Part of the sex role distinctions and verbal interaction is the women's performance and part the men's performance. In discussing language used by women, Lakoff (1975, p. 7-8) said:

. . . the overall effect of "women's language". . . is this: it submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it. . . of course, other forms of behavior in this society have the same purpose; but the phenomena seem especially clear linguistically.

The ultimate effect is that women are systematically

denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behavior along with other aspects of their behavior; and the irony here is that women are made to feel that they deserve such treatment. . . . But in fact it is precisely because women have learned their lessons so well that they later suffer such discrimination.

Just as other aspects of language are acquired, Lakoff postulates that a female style of speaking is acquired by the young girl and remains a part of her linguistic competence into adulthood. ". . . The acquisition of this special style of speech will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position to refuse to take her seriously as a human being." (Lakoff, 1975, p. 5)

Based on her observation and reports of others, Lakoff (1975) said both boys and girls learn women's language under the age of 5. Then boys go through a transition period. By about 10 years the two languages (female and male) are present. She provided no data to substantiate her observations.

Considering interests and activities of children, Hartley (1974) concluded that boys are restricted to masculine behaviors by 5 and that girls gradually develop feminine behaviors until about 10. While Hartley did not report on language per se in children, she provided the results of interviews with boys from 8 to 11 years. These boys expressed the ideas that in addition to being strong physically they had to know what girls didn't know, and as men they would have to make decisions and have to be in charge. They reported that women were indecisive, weak, and not very intelligent.

It seems from these reports that young girls establish female language first and then female behaviors and that young boys establish male behaviors first and male language later. Both researchers agree that gender differences are acquired and demonstrated by about 10 years of age.

Edelsky (1977) had male and female children and adults judge utterances with differing features for the sex of the speaker. She found that language and sex role stereotypes were linked. By sixth grade (12 years) the judgments of sex role of the speaker demonstrated competence like the adults.

Using performances in schools, specifically reading, speaking and math, Gersoni-Stavn (1974) reported changes in performance in adolescence. That is young girls begin by excelling and then fall noticeably behind during adolescence. This problem has even been noted likewise by Max Rafferty (1981). Both agree that this reversal in performance comes not with changing ability but with

changing status, role perceptions and peer pressure for conformity.

With the limited data, and lack of specific differences it is difficult to determine whether there is disagreement on age of acquisition of different linguistic styles or whether the different performances used reflect different kinds or degrees of competence in young people. However, there are some data on specific differences in adult women's oral communication.

Studies have documented a difference in female and male use of paralanguage (Key, 1975), of phonology (Henley and Thorne, 1975), and in the use of adjectives (Key, 1975; Lakoff, 1975). The study of differences in syntax has been primarily conducted by Lakoff (1975) and other writers discussing syntactic differences that utilize her data. Lakoff's data is from white middle class and was gathered by introspection. She found data in her own speech, speech of friends and from T.V. media. She said there are no syntactic rules used only by women but there are certain ones used much more and in a wider range of environments by women than by men. She named tag questions and hedges (such as I guess, I think, I wonder, kinda, sorta, well, you know). Lakoff (1975, 1977) has suggested politeness rules of formality, hesitancy and camaraderie or equality. She (1975) said that pragmatically women's speech is more polite than men demonstrated in requests stated in question form or in a question + please or a negative question + please. Another linguistic feature was mentioned and this was one found only in women's speech - a declarative statement with a question intonation. According to Lakoff all of these structures have a common bond in that the speaker is not committed to a position and can avoid conflict with the addressee. Thus, indecisiveness, uncertainty and inability to make up one's mind is communicated. The decision is on the surface left to the hearer.

Despite the request for further observational data (Kramer, 1974; Lakoff, 1975) actual research data from oral language in use remains scarce. The purpose of this study is to investigate syntactic differences in oral discourse of male and female teenagers. Since previous research has been criticized on the basis that it has been conducted by females (Macaulay, 1978), this study was conducted by two researchers - one male and one female.

The unplanned discourse was collected from nine mixed sex dyads, three at each age level of 13, 16, and 19 years. Each female/male dyad was given ten minutes to suggest and discuss items that would be representative of America in 1980's to be included in a time capsule.

The taped discourse was analyzed by syntactic forms, not as autonomous syntax, but rather according to the function. The initial analyses involved were the syntactic differences that Lakoff reported as those that put women in a subservient role:

tag questions, question intonations of a statement, and hedges. The data were also analyzed for questions, and subject pronouns.

The data were first considered in the category of syntax that has been discussed as that which puts the speaker in a position of communicating uncertainty, subservience or that which leaves the decision to another - hedges and questions. Lakoff (1975) described hedges as words which convey speaker uncertainty. She said if a statement is made the speaker may be "taken to task" but a hedge makes the speaker far less vulnerable to attack. If used in excess a lack of authority is conveyed. She said adult women use more of these hedges than men.

Table 1 indicates male and female teenagers use of hedges in the lexicon. The first category we have labeled lexical includes

Table 1  
Summary Of The Frequency Of  
Teenagers Use Of The Words Of Uncertainty

	<u>Lexical</u>	<u>Verbs of Thinking</u>	<u>Verbs of Withdrawal</u>
13 years			
Male	7	1	2
Female	5	2	7
16 years			
Male	3	2	4
Female	1	7	13
19 years			
Male	19	10	9
Female	4	9	8

those words called hedges. Lakoff named "kinda" and "sorta." The data in this study revealed the use of two other words that seem to be viable hedges - "probably" and "maybe." The hedging effect of these words is demonstrated by the data. For example, "Probably put the radio in or something" from a male at 13 years or "Maybe like science, or math, English" from a male at 16 years or "Probably Ronald Reagan would be really good in this, too" from a male at 19 years were hedges. Observation of Table 1 indicated that contrary to Lakoff's observations of adults, teenage males used more of these words. Although a consistent pattern, the difference has little meaning until 19 years where the males exceeded the female remarkably.

The next category was verbs of thinking. Lakoff (1977)

described these verbs that do not indicate a cognitive act, a mental process. Rather they have the effect of softening the illocutionary force of the statement and thus function similar to a hedge. Examples of verbs of thinking from this data included just those suggested by Lakoff; think, believe, guess, wonder and suppose. Examples from the data are:

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Female, 16 years | "I think I would put in some Chinese Food."                     |
| Male, 16 years   | "I wonder if religion should be in."                            |
| Female, 19 years | "I guess to maximize the individual things we would want hmmm." |
| Male, 19 years   | "No, but running shoes, I think, for sure."                     |

Table 1 indicates that while females used these verbs slightly more than males at 13 years and 16 years, the difference was not enough to make any statement and by 19 years verbs of thinking were used about equally. These data are in opposition to Lakoff's (1975) observations that adult women use more of such hedging verbs.

The final group was called verbs of withdrawal. This group has never been mentioned as indicative of women's language. These included: "I don't know", "I can't think", and "I'm not sure." Such phrases appeared mainly as a separate statment that comprized a turn. Occasionally they were combined with another constituent sentence conjoined with "but" or "and" and at times were combined with no joining marker. Examples are: "And so in general it seems like its very content to be strong and rich and - and - I don't know." "Not being one I don't know." "I'm not sure they are part of society." Whether these utterances were used alone or were joined, they functioned as a withdrawal on the part of the speaker. So they were labeled withdrawal verbs. Withdrawal verbs are a type of hedge in that the speaker does not make a committment and in that they certainly convey lack of authority. These verbs of withdrawal were used obviously more frequently by females than males at 13 years and 16 years but by 19 years they were equal.

Lakoff (1975) named certain syntactic structures that conveyed uncertainty, lack of authority and subservience and thus functioned like hedges. Among those that she discussed as being used more frequently by adult women were tag questions and statements with a question intonation. The discourse in this study included tag questions such as: "It's just for the United States, isn't it?" and statement questions such as: "Television or something that's been on?" However, observation of Table 2 indicates that female and male teenagers used both of these structures approximately equally.

Tag questions were rarely used by either gender. Statements that became questions by intonation were used more and by both genders. These data do not support Lakoff's observations that females use these tag questions more frequently and that only

females use statement questions.

Table 2  
Summary Of The Frequency Of Tennagers Use Of  
Question Forms Conveying Uncertainty

	<u>Tag Questions</u>	<u>Statement Questions</u>	<u>Questions</u>
13 years			
Male	0	5	18
Female	0	7	12
16 years			
Male	2	8	23
Female	1	6	20
19 years			
Male	1	9	20
Female	0	11	32

The analyses for this study included other question forms. These questions were those that were syntactically a question and that indicated a lack of knowledge, a desire to have the other make the decision, or were used in place of making a statement.<sup>1</sup> The following were examples of these questions:

- 13 years male: "What else shall we put in?"
- 13 years female: "Do you think books would be okay?"
- 16 years male: "Do we want to throw in a Reagan button?"
- 16 years female: "What do older people like?"
- 19 years male: "So what is the food that is representative of the 1980's?"
- 19 years female: "So why not put in an MX missile there?"

Table 2 indicates these questions were used more frequently by males at 13 years and slightly more at 16 years but by 19 years the females used conspicuously more questions. Since the effect of such questions is to give the other person the credit for knowing the answer or the decision, they are a structure that must be considered in male/female discourse. Questions of this type have not been previously mentioned in female/male discourse.

Another way to consider these syntactic structures is in terms of politeness. Lakoff (1975) said that women's language is more polite. In a discussion of rules of politeness she included questions of many types, question intonation of statements, tag questions and hedges as indicative of politeness rule of hesitancy. The hesitancy rule accounted for politeness that allowed the addressee his options (Lakoff, 1977). In terms of the hesitancy rule the data in this study do not demonstrate that female

teenagers are more polite than male teenagers. Females used more withdrawal verbs as hedges at 13 years and 16 years and more questions at 19 years. Males used more questions at 13 years and more lexical hedges at all ages with a sharp increase at 19 years. These differences counterbalance each other and all other words and structures analyzed were used equally by both genders. So teenage females do not syntactically demonstrate more hesitancy politeness than teenage males.

The final analyses of data included subject pronouns used by female and male teenagers. Researchers of gender differences have not discussed the use of pronouns; however, perusal of the discourse in the present study indicated such differences might be present. So the data were analyzed for frequency of use of subject pronouns.

The use of "I" as the subject pronoun is self disclosing. "I" also indicates a self confidence and the assumption that "I" carries weight. "I" indicates a willingness to take a position on one's own authority as in "I'm sure." Connected with a hedge, "I think", "I" reflects a sharing of personal attitudes. While these two uses of "I" are different, they have a common base in that they indicate the personal statement of the speaker and make no assumption about the listener. Originally the data were separated into "I" as part of a hedge and "I" as a straight forward statement. This separation indicated the same differences and were thus combined in Table 3.

Table 3  
Summary Of The Frequency Of  
Teenagers Use Of Subject Pronouns

	<u>I</u>	<u>You</u>	<u>We</u>	<u>It</u>
13 years				
Male	6	5	14	0
Female	13	3	17	0
16 years				
Male	8	13	36	7
Female	31	10	33	1
19 years				
Male	33	16	26	21
Female	28	16	42	4

Observation of Table 3 indicated females of 13 years and 16 years definitely use "I" more frequently than males, but at 19 years the males used slightly more.

The use of "you" as a subject pronoun has the effect of giving the responsibility to the other person. At the same time the speaker acknowledges the other and moves, at least temporarily, from an "I" world. Among the total utterances, four statements seemed to use "you" more as a challenge than a friendly consideration (i.e. "You know some engineers?"). These were included because they referred to the addressee and they turned the responsibility to the addressee. Every other use of "you" was of the type that expressed a deference to the addressee as in, "You want to go first?" or "Do you want any records in there?" If used by a stronger person, such deference is a politeness form of camaraderie or equality. If used by the weaker person, such deference indicates a lack of confidence, authority or indecisiveness. Table 3 indicates female and male teenagers throughout the age span used "you" with equal frequency.

"We" as a subject pronoun used by the speaker seems to have several purposes. "We" used by the strong person may be a polite way of assuming control. Or "we" may be a gesture of equality, if it is used by the stronger person or an equal person. This would seem to be a use of politeness by communicating camaraderie.<sup>2</sup> As such it minimizes the speaker's singular power and includes both persons. On the other hand, if "we" is used by a weaker person or person of perceived unequal status then "we" is a bid for more power. It is not difficult to understand that the speaker's use of "we" can generate two quite opposite reactions in the listener. The listener might feel warm and happy that we are together, a team. Or the listener might be slightly to highly insulted saying or wanting to say "What do you mean 'we'?" While "we" has not been considered as a part of women's language, the results of these data indicate "we" may be an important form to investigate. Table 3 indicates little difference in the use of "we" until 19 years. By 19 years the females used considerably more "we" as a subject pronoun than males used.

In contrast to the use of "we", Table 3 demonstrates that teenage males of 16 and 19 years use remarkably more utterances beginning with "it." Lakoff (1977) discussed sentences beginning with "it" as an expression of aloofness. An example from these data "It's not that big a deal right now" is more aloof than if the speaker had said "I don't want to include that." While "it" maintains distance, such use also indicates an outside source of information or an indefinite reference of authority as in "It seems like it is mostly engineering."<sup>3</sup> In all cases "it" avoids indicating a personal position. The use of "it" has never been investigated in gender language, but seems to have some important implications.

Several other general observations are interesting. In terms of conversational openings, the females began the discourse in seven of the nine samples and in six of those she began with a question. In terms of record keeping, in six of the nine samples the females kept count of the items selected. In half of those the male noted his expectation or desire for her to count. Such

observations deserve further consideration beyond the scope of the present study.

The lack of actual data makes definite conclusions impossible at this time. If women's language does demonstrate differences in the proposed structures, these data demonstrate that adolescents have not yet learned gender differences in language. The lexical hedges that women are supposed to use with greater frequency are used with greater frequency at all ages by teenage males. Other hedges such as verbs of thinking and tag questions that women reportedly used more of are used equally by both genders in teen years. The question intonations of statements that supposedly only women use were used equally by both groups as was the subject pronoun you.

The systematic study of these structures refutes Lakoff's (1975) observations that by 10 years both languages are present, if these structures are central to the issue. Furthermore, Edelsky's study reported that sex-linked perceptions were established by 12 years. The current data indicate there may be a difference in perception and actual use. But gender differences in language use appear not to be established by 10 or 12 years and indeed not by 13 or 16 years.

Status awareness may be the crucial factor. While it is apparent by Hartley's (1974) study and by observation of young people that sex role distinctions are clearly marked by 10 or so, status differences are not marked. Investigators have reported that peer pressure and status changes began affecting school performance during adolescence (Gersoni-Stavn, 1974) and peaked by the time students are college sophomores (Rafferty, 1981). This research suggests that gender differences in language may begin to appear much later, more in conjunction with peer pressure for males to outperform females. A number of differences were noted by 19 years that were not present at earlier ages. In withdrawal hedges the frequency of use became equal at 19 years. However, a few structures showed decisive shifts in frequency of use by gender from 13 and 16 years to 19 years. "I" was used more by females until 19 years when males used "I" much more. "It" was used by strikingly more males at 19 years. On the other hand standard questions and "we" as a subject pronoun were used about evenly until 19 years when female frequency was far greater. None of these structures showing differences at 19 have been previously considered. These marked changes at 19 years provide enough data to warrant further research into what is the language use beyond 19 years, when status differences and peer pressure for sex role stereotypes is speculated to be more salient.

Another consideration is that different situations must be considered. Lakoff (1975) suggested more frequency by females in a wider range of environments. This study only covered one situation. A situational difference was proposed by Lakoff (1975). She said that her observations indicated that females in an academic setting have learned to use two languages - one for the academic situation and one for other situations. Her other observation is that men who are professional academicians use a feminine type of language. The teenagers in this study were providing the discourse in the school buildings and the task was an academic type. Furthermore, the 19 year group were college students. The academic situation in this study, contrasted with what appears to be other situations in all the available studies of language differences, may explain the lack of agreement.

Other differences that should be considered are interpersonal relations and individual differences. The people in this study were all acquainted but data in women's language seem to come from close personal relationships, although that is not specified. Close personal relations accompanied by a desire to please or preconceived notions of status in that relationship as well as understood expectations of the male may affect the language use of women.

Finally, individual communication patterns may affect the data. The data of this study reveal that some individuals definitely displayed a preponderance of certain syntactic strategies, although most did not. However, if the scattered data reported by others center on an individual or a few, the results could be skewed.

The outcome is that before general conclusions are reached more systematic data must be researched. While intuitive judgments have long been accepted as valid linguistic evidence, intuition must be supported by data. Since personal feelings seem strong in discussion of female and male language, data become an important and obvious need.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the discourse a few questions were used that were rhetorical (i.e. "What is "sunk in punk?" A punk record. No that would be dumb.") or that were a challenge (i.e. "What's that supposed to represent?") Such questions were used in small amounts and with equal frequency by both genders. They were eliminated from the data reported in the table because the purpose and the effect was not uncertainty.

<sup>2</sup> Lakoff (1977) discusses a rule of politeness she calls camaraderie or equality. She says the result of this rule is that it communicates both the speaker and addressee are equal and it is effective only if the speaker has superior or equal status. Although she does not mention "we" under this rule, it seems to fit. In these data no instances of "we" used royally or patron-

izingly were found.

<sup>3</sup>"It" used in utterances where the referent was clearly marked were not included.

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