



WOMEN'S LANGUAGE FEATURES USED BY WOMEN ACROSS DIFFERENT PUBLIC ROLES

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Abstract

Since the rise of the second wave of feminist movement, the contribution of women in professional fields has significantly increased. As women occupy these public roles, studies found that they can still adopt the distinct language, which Lakoff (1975) termed as women's language features. This research aimed to compare and analyze the use of these features among four popular professional public roles in the United States, namely, politician, businesswoman, lawyer, and artist. Furthermore, four figures are selected with consideration of one representative per each role. The figures were Kamala Harris, Indra Nooyi, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Selena Gomez, respectively. A qualitative method was employed, using interview transcripts and audio from YouTube videos. The analysis included all ten recognized features, such as lexical hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, empty adjectives, and others. These features were identified through close reading of the transcripts and careful listening to the audio, then categorized based on the original framework. The findings showed that there were variations in the frequency of feature occurrences across the roles. Moreover, the tendencies appeared to functioned the women's language features as a deliberate way to meet job requirements.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is defined as a tool in communication. The use of language plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions, expressing identities, and reflecting societal structures. This construction of social interactions through language is inevitably influenced by environmental factors. Boldyrev and Dubrovskaya (2016) argue that language use in discourse is not merely a reflection of ethnic identity, as traditionally assumed, but is instead shaped dominantly by the speaker's sociocultural knowledge, acquired through lived experiences and social roles. For instance, two individuals of the same ethnicity may speak differently due to social factors such as education or socioeconomic status. This conventional use of language opens a view in identifying an individual and a community, as discourse is constructed by language speakers as representatives of sociocultural groups.

A specific branch of linguistics that studies about the connection between language and social environments is called sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics connects the disciplines of sociology and linguistics, focusing on their interrelationship. Specifically, sociolinguistics is categorized as one of the branches in macro-linguistics with its scope that highlights the relationship between social factors, which are factors outside of the language itself. Other branches in this category include psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and discourse analysis.

Whereas the other category, the micro-linguistics, focuses on the internal structure of a language such as how politeness is formed in conversation between peers. Branches in this category includes phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

One element that influences language use is gender. There are two definitions of gender in discourse, primarily and secondary. Primarily, gender is defined as a grammatical term to distinguish different classes of nouns and pronouns that follow different grammatical rules in some languages. While the secondary definition of the term gender, which this research refers to, is the description of the behavioral, and psychological characteristics associated with the male and female sex (Malik, 2020). This defines gender is seen from societal position as the terms included are women and men. In sociolinguistics, gendered language use has been a significant topic to be observed. Particularly, women are observed to have different linguistics behaviour compared to men, a phenomenon that has been linked to various social and cultural factors.

One of the earliest and most influential works on gendered language use was Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* which was first published as a journal article in 1973. Lakoff, in this seminal work of hers, argued that women's speech tends to reflect societal expectations of politeness and deference. The linguistic features reinforce women's subordinate social status by making their speech appear tentative or less authoritative (Lakoff, 1973). The article was extended later to a complete book in 1975 with the same title where she further categorized this gendered language, which later commonly known as a theory called women's language features.

After Lakoff, the study of gendered language, particularly one that is used by women, continued. Judy Pearson in 1985 argued that there is a distinction in the level of self-assertiveness shown by men and women. In social practice, women are more encouraged to be polite, quiet, and considerate of other people's feelings which resulted in women having difficulty to defend themselves with strong language (Pearson, 1985). This stereotype brought one of the reasons gender studies are conducted in the first place. And the studies continue as long as there is an existence of social distinction about the rights and obligations a person of gender should carry (Arviani & Sikumbang, 2024).

Since the rise of the second wave feminist movement, women have been given opportunities to share equal public roles with men in a variety of fields. According to the data in the United States (U.S.), by 2016 women has hold nearly half of the labor force and management positions, they are increasingly perceptible in upper management and politics (Scarborough, Sin, & Risman, 2019). This amount of contribution should prove that women can be intelligent and no longer considered 'the other' as the patriarchal ideology states (Beauvoir, 2016, as cited in Kasimbara, 2022).

As women take on roles in professional fields, studies found that they may bring with them distinctive features including linguistic behaviours. Therefore, this study investigates the established phenomenon of women's language and seeks to determine how much of this framework is still applicable to women in various professional roles. To provide enough validity of comparative perspective, the research uses four generally most popular public roles in professional work fields, namely, politician, businesswoman, lawyer, and artist.

Moreover, this study focuses on one key figure as representative of each role; Kamala Harris as the politician, Indra Nooyi as the businesswoman, Ruth Bader Ginsburg as the lawyer, and Selena Gomez as the artist. These four figures were selected based on careful consideration of their influence within the professional fields, as each made notable achievements. Kamala Harris is the former Vice President of the U.S., served from 2021 to 2025, known as the first female and the first African-American to occupy the position. Whereas Indra Nooyi is a celebrated figure in modern business history as one of the longest-serving female CEOs, based on her twelve years tenure in PepsiCo from 2008 to 2016. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, on the other hand, is the prominent figure in the law field. She was a pioneering advocate for gender equality, advancing in women's legal rights, and a leading figure in the second wave of feminist movement. Finally, Selena Gomez is an actress, singer, and producer, also known as the most-followed woman on Instagram globally, underscores her significant influence in both the music and film industries.

Thus, the four figures representing successful women in the professional sectors they are in. Accordingly, this research aims to identified the language pattern utilized by the figures, particularly in the adherence to Lakoff's theory of women's language features, regardless of their public roles. Furthermore, the aim is to compare and seek the distinction between the use of the theory by each role, which becomes the problem that this qualitative research is conducted on.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several previous studies found which examines the theory of women's language features. An article by Suhesty and Sriyono (2023) analyzed the features found in broadcasting media through podcasts by Najwa Zebian. The findings revealed intensifiers being the most dominant features used and the most frequent function was expressing feelings. This demonstrates women's language features as an effective linguistics style in an evocative and casual setting. Furthermore, Joseph et al. (2021) studied politician Kamala Harris' deliberate language during the 2020 U.S. vice-presidential debate, whereas Surya Adi et al. (2022) studied the language used by artist Taylor Swift. The findings of both studies suggest that the adherence of women as public figures to the women's language feature appears to reflect confidence and assertiveness instead of the opposite.

These previous studies in various media and subjects have proven the wide applicability of the women's language features. However, neither of them examines the use of the features in more than one figures. Therefore, this research brings a novel perspective to the study of women's language features by comparing women in four distinct public roles, namely, politician, businesswoman, lawyer, and artist, while much of the existing literature tends to generalize and often overlooking the intricate interplay of gender, professional roles, and social contexts. The aim is to understand the language used by women in different public roles, with different occupational environments, contributing new insights into the diversity of language used by the same gender.

This research uses a theory of women's language features by Lakoff (1975). Lakoff suggested that women's speech was characterized by particular linguistic features. These

features are categorized into ten, they are *lexical hedges and fillers, tag-questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, 'hypercorrect' grammar, super polite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress*. The data collected are in the form of words and phrases which identified in the utterances for each representative figures of their roles. The analysis results in a table and descriptions detailing which of the ten features are used by each of the four public figures as representatives of their roles. The findings highlight the most frequently occurring features and functions within each role. A qualitative analysis of the findings is then conducted, leading to conclusions that summarize the patterns and differences observed.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this research is the qualitative method. Creswell (2017) stated that qualitative research is initiated with observation and resulting in a series of interpretations which able to make the world visible. In addition, Auliya et al. (2020) define qualitative method as a method that discusses culture, social phenomena, and human behavior. Creswell (2017) further mentioned the material used for qualitative research include field notes, interviews, conversations, and recordings.

In this research, the data gathered from interview transcripts and audio sourced from various YouTube videos featuring women from different public roles. The selected videos involve a politician, a businesswoman, a lawyer, and an artist, each represented by a single video. The settings of these interviews vary depending on the natural environment of the speakers; interview with the politician and the lawyer are formal, while the businesswoman's is semi-formal, and the artist's is informal.

The data were manually analyzed by identifying and classifying linguistics features based on Lakoff's (1975) theory, which includes lexical hedges and fillers, tag-questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, 'hypercorrect' grammar, super polite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. A table is provided in the findings section to clearly show the frequency and distribution of each feature used by the speakers. Afterward, the data are interpreted in context through observational analysis, as reflections of language behavior shaped by the speakers' public roles and environments.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the findings of the research along with a discussion that elaborates on their relevance to the research objectives. Table 1 presents the frequency of women's language features found in the utterances of the four figures as representatives of the roles.

Table 1. Frequency of Women's Language Features per Figure

Women's Language Features	Figures in Each Public Roles			
	Kamala Harris	Indra Nooyi	Ruth Bader Ginsburg	Selena Gomez
Lexical Hedges&Fillers	33	22	12	42
Tag Questions	-	4	-	-
Rising Intonation on Declaratives	1	7	-	4
Empty Adjectives	3	7	2	8
Precise Color Terms	-	-	-	-
Intensifiers	9	5	11	16
Hyper-Correct Grammar	17	7	3	14
Superpolite Forms	9	4	8	11
Avoidance of Swear Words	-	3	-	1
Emphatic Stress	13	21	39	41

4.1 Lexical Hedges and Fillers

A hedge refers to a word or phrase that indicates a degree of uncertainty. It is used to avoid sounding too direct or to avoid taking full responsibility for a claim. Common hedging phrases include uncertain terms like *'kind of'* or *'sort of'*, as well as expressions that signal personal opinion, such as *'I think'*, *'I believe'*, or *'to be honest'*. On the other hand, fillers are words, phrases, or sounds that appear between words in speech. They are a "thinking moment" of a speaker, indicating that there are more statements coming or a hesitation happening. Examples of fillers include *'umm...'*, *'you know'*, and *'well'*. Below is an example taken from the data.

Datum 1. From Kamala Harris' Interview

Harris: "...about the relationship that we have developed over many years **umm...** and a shared vision that **I think** we have for that region of the world but also the partnership **umm...** It was sad and shocking."

This statement was delivered by Kamala Harris in response to a question regarding the recent assassination of the Japanese Prime Minister. In addressing such a sensitive topic, Harris appeared to be careful with her words in a vulnerable answer. She used the filler *'umm...'* to signal a moment of hesitation, indicating her effort to make an appropriate response. Additionally, she applied the hedge *'I think'* to soften the assertiveness of her statement, framing it to put the statement explicitly as a personal opinion rather than an absolute claim.

The findings indicate that this feature of women's language is most frequently used by the artist, Selena Gomez, who exhibited 42 occurrences. This pattern reflects a low level of

assertiveness tied to the role of the artist, which is often associated with creativity and the expression of personal ideologies. Artists commonly promote their ideology to the public through their work (Sarapik, 2017). This aligns with their tendency in using the feature based on the function of lexical hedges, which, as Lakoff (1975) suggests, are used by women to avoid strong statements, protect themselves from potentially controversial viewpoints, and soften the assertiveness of their statements. In contrast, to assert their clients, lawyers are required to be firm (Markovitz, 2008, as cited in Kruse, 2009). Which therefore demonstrate a lower use of this feature. The data shows that lawyers have the least tendency to use lexical hedges, with only 12 occurrences identified.

4.2 Tag Questions

A tag question is a syntactic structure where a declarative or imperative clause is followed by a short interrogative question (the “tag”), such as *‘isn’t it?’* or *‘don’t you?’*. This feature is more commonly used by women than men with the aim to seek agreement, confirmation, and a form of politeness Lakoff (1975). Below is the example of tag question in an utterance from the data.

Datum 2. From Indra Nooyi’s Interview

Nooyi: *“I think in many ways, upskilling and reskilling is up to the individual employee too, because companies can only do so much, **right?**”*

In the utterance above, Nooyi was expressing an opinion, indicated by the use of the hedge *‘I think’* and continued her statement in the form of a question rather than a declarative sentence by adding *“right?”* at the end. By doing so, Nooyi appeared to be seeking validation or agreement from the audience, which made her speech less assertive.

Based on the findings, this feature is used exclusively by Indra Nooyi, who represents the role of the businesswoman. In the context of business, persuasion is an important practice, as the field revolves around trade and negotiation (Conger, 1998). One of the ways in persuading is the strategy of indirect invitation, which encourage the listener to agree with a statement by prompting a subtle impulse. This aligns with the aim of tag question as a polite command that does not force an agreement on the addressee.

4.3 Rising Intonation on Declaratives

As the name suggests, rising intonation on declaratives refers to the phenomenon in which a speaker uses an upward pitch at the end of a declarative statement, making it resemble the intonation typically used in a question. According to Lakoff (1975), this feature reflects the lack of confidence in assertion. The use of risen intonation makes the speaker appear to seek an agreement, to be polite, or to seek validation. Below is the example of rising intonation from the data.

Datum 3. From Indra Nooyi’s Interview

Nooyi: *“I mean, I’ve had the privilege of **knowing him.**”*

For the context, Nooyi was telling a story of her meeting with, a famous comedian, Trevor Noah on her travel to Dallas. She explained that she never expected to interact with him as a business person. With their roles being highlighted, Nooyi did not want to sound too certain about “knowing him”, given the differences in their work cultures. This uncertainty and politeness signaled with the rising intonation. By doing so, she softened her claim and created the impression that she was unsure about the terms she used.

Based on the data, this feature appears in the speech of the politician, businesswoman, and artist, but is absent in the speech of the lawyer. The businesswoman uses this feature more frequently than the artist and the politician, with 7, 4, and 1 total occurrences, respectively. This suggests how the degree of caution and required assertiveness can vary depending on the role. As evidenced by Zacharias (2008), a lawyer’s reputation is perceived by clients through their level of aggressiveness. Which contrasts with the demonstration of self-doubt a rising intonation may indicate.

4.4 Empty Adjectives

Lakoff (1975) observed that there is a disparity in the vocabulary between women and men, particularly in the adjectives they use to indicate admiration or approbation of something. For instance, women might say ‘*It’s a **lovely** dress*’ which appears to be vague because it lacks the specific characteristics of the dress when compared to ‘*It’s a **lovely blue** dress*’. Thus, it makes the adjective appears “empty”. Below is the example of this feature in an utterance from the data.

Datum 4. From Selena Gomez’s Interview

Gomez: “*And she was **beautiful** and **bold** and **brave** and she just knew what she wanted.*”

For the context, Gomez was sharing about her experience working with her co-star, Karla Sofía Gascón, and began to describe her with adjectives. She said the term “*beautiful*”, “*bold*”, and “*brave*” without further explaining the circumstances those traits may appear in. As a result, the adjectives became limited to a mere expression of subjective feelings. This lack of conveying information suggests that, in using this feature, women may prioritize maintaining relationships over being assertive.

The findings show that Selena Gomez, representing the role of the artist, has the highest frequency of using this feature, followed by Indra Nooyi as a businesswoman. In contrast, the politician and the lawyer use it less frequently. Politicians and lawyers are typically associated with formal settings, while businesswomen and artists are more often linked to less formal environments. Interviews in formal settings tend to demand objective answers and assertive statements more than those in informal or casual settings. Thus, the less subjective a role must present themselves to the public, the more they avoid empty adjective in their language features.

4.5 Intensifiers

As the name suggest, intensifiers are used to strengthen the intensity of a statement. Examples of intensifiers are 'so', 'very', and 'really' as in 'I love it **so much**'. The use of intensifier reflects an attempt to express strong emotions vaguely, by not making clear how strong those emotions are with further description (Lakoff, 1975). While both men and women use this feature, it is observed that women use it more often. Below is the example of intensifiers in an utterance from the data.

Data 5. From Ruth Bader Ginsburg's Interview

Ginsburg: *"I received an application for a law clerk post from a man who explained he was going to law school at night because his wife was an economist with a **very** good job at the World Bank. And so, he was the primary caretaker of their children."*

Ginsburg was sharing a brief story from a case that demonstrates the positive impact of the new law, which allows women to work. She highlighted how this law is also benefiting men's roles in the family system. According to the story, a man can now play a more significant role in raising children, which contrasts with traditional household roles, while a woman can better value herself within society. To describe the woman's value, Ginsburg used the intensifier 'very' in the phrase "*very good job at the World Bank*", illustrates that she is highly valued at the role she occupies. This use of intensifier was considered sufficient to describe something than any clearer adjectives which aligns with the stated purpose of intensifier according to Lakoff (1975).

The data shows the frequency of intensifiers used in the utterances of women from various public roles. It is showed that Selena Gomez, representing the role of the artist, has the highest tendency to use this feature, followed by the lawyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. To explain this, their practices in the field must be considered. Both artists and lawyers share a similarity as they tend to project a strong personal principle to the public. Artists need to convince their audience of the value of their work, while lawyers must present persuasive arguments to support their verdicts.

4.6 Hyper-Correct Grammar

As Lakoff (1975) observed, the tendency to adjust to the culture of vernacular language is generally more apparent in men than in women. Women are more likely to use formal terms and grammar rather than slang or abbreviated terms. For instance, instead of saying 'gonna', 'we're', or 'singin' which are common in verbal language, they prefer to say 'going to' and 'we are' without contraction, and 'singing' with a clear /ŋ/ sound for the suffix '-ing', following the proper spelling more commonly associated with written language. The purpose of women using this feature is to project a respectable image and to be perceived as well-educated, thereby gaining higher social value. Below is an example of hyper-correct grammar found in one of the utterances from the data.

Datum 6. From Selena Gomez's interview.

Gomez: *"I, um... I'm **going to** give all this credit to my mom."*

In Datum 6, Gomez responded to a comment about the numerous headlines discussing her net worth by expressing her appreciation for her mother in a serious tone. Despite the interview setting was casual, Gomez chose to use the phrase *'going to'* instead of the more informal *'gonna'*, which is commonly used in conversational speech. With the use of standard grammar in informal contexts, Gomez presents herself with a deliberate attempt to maintain a polished and respectable image

The data shows that this feature is used more frequently by Kamala Harris in her role as the politician. As public figures, politicians are expected to present themselves as well-educated, dependable individuals who can communicate effectively and appropriately. Politicians, who are often engaged in formal settings, tend to use this feature more frequently in order to be taken seriously by their audience. By using proper grammatical forms, they demonstrate their authority and professionalism, both of which are necessary for obtaining public trust.

4.7 Superpolite Forms

According to Lakoff (1975), superpolite forms are part of the politeness strategies commonly used by women. Women are observed to have an expertise in speaking strategically than carelessly blurting out their thoughts. This is demonstrated by their use of euphemisms and indirect requests. Below is an example of a superpolite form found in the data.

Datum 7. From Kamala Harris' interview.

Harris: *"If you've ever looked at, **if i may be so blunt**, an autopsy photograph to see what it does to the human body..."*

In Datum 7, Harris discussed the concerning issue of gun violence in the U.S., illustrating its immense horror through vivid imagery. However, she prefaced her statement with the phrase *"if I may be so blunt"* to excuse herself in advance. This expression reflects Harris' awareness of the potential impoliteness of her remark and her effort to soften it. Her careful structuring of the utterance can be seen as an example of using a superpolite form.

From the data, Selena Gomez, as an artist, shows the highest tendency to use this feature. In relation to her role, an artist must maintain a positive public image, as they are a significant influence on their globally diverse audience. As a result, they often rely on politeness strategies, such as superpolite forms, to protect their image and manage their interactions.

4.8 Avoidance of Strong Swear Words

Lakoff (1975) frequently alluded to the idea that women are expected to behave better than men by society. They are supposed to speak more politely and carefully when conveying

their emotions through words. As a result, they tend to avoid strong, assertive language, such as swear words. For instance, instead of using terms like '*shit*', they prefer to say '*oh dear*' or '*goodness*'. Below is an example of this feature found in the data.

Datum 8. From Indra Nooyi's interview

Nooyi: "***Hell***, come on seriously. I'm just a business person, all right?"

In the utterance above, Nooyi expressed her frustration in a light-hearted, joking manner. She was telling the audience of her unfamiliar experience in the entertainment field in Dallas. In doing so, he creates a sense of relatability with the audience, while also carefully managing her public image. Notably, she opted for the milder term '*hell*' instead of stronger swear words such as '*damn*' or '*fuck*' or many others. This decision reflects her awareness of the need to balance honesty with professionalism, ensuring that her expression of frustration does not cross boundaries that could be regarded inappropriate or disrespectful in such a public setting.

The data shows that Indra Nooyi as a businesswoman and Selena Gomez as an artist are the only figure where avoidance of strong swear words are found in their speech. In terms of occupation, both businesswomen and artists often adopt a casual speaking style as part of their persuasive communication. However, they still need to maintain a positive image by speaking politely. One way they do this is by avoiding strong swear words, which helps prevent their speech from sounding too casual or impolite.

4.9 Empathic Stress

Empathic stress is a linguistic feature used to emphasize the meaning of a word by placing stress on it. In her book, Lakoff (1975) refers to this feature as "speaking in italics," drawing a parallel to how italics are used in writing to highlight or strengthen a point. The tendency of women to use empathic stress in their speech reflects the less assertiveness they can be. This is because the feature is often used by women to in purpose of convincing the other parties and drawing attention to what they are saying, directing them to listen. Below is an example of empathic stress found in the data.

Datum 9. From Ruth Bader Ginsburg's interview.

Ginsburg: "*What is gone for the most part are the **explicit** stop signs that is women can't go here, they can't become police officers, they can't become airline pilots.*"

In Datum 9, Ginsburg discussed how the new law, rooted in feminist ideology, has opened up opportunities for women to use their talents without legal barriers. However, there are still stigmas lingering around women who aspire to succeed, and Ginsburg aimed to clarify that she was talking about the unwritten societal norms rather than the official U.S. law. To highlight this, she stressed the word "*explicit*," making it stand out among the rest of her words. As a result, the effect of this stressed word is emphasized enough to represents

the whole sentence. This emphasis effectively conveyed her point, helping the audience understand her message and drawing their attention through the use of empathic stress.

The data shows that Selena Gomez, as an artist, is the figure with the most frequent use of empathic stress followed by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, as a lawyer. Both artists and lawyers depend on the public ears and attention for their reputations. In other words, they generally need to assure and direct the public about their abilities to be seen as qualified. Their frequent use of empathic stress suggests the use of a strategic approach to communication.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis concludes that the women's use of certain linguistic features serves as an effective strategy to meet the communicative demands of their professional fields, rather than simply indicating linguistic weakness or lack of assertiveness. The tendency of one figure to use a feature is influenced by their public role, as it reflects their level of self-awareness in presenting public persona. As the findings revealed, seven out of ten women's language features appeared in the utterances of the politician. With the role's emphasis on gaining public trust, this role showed the most frequent use of hyper-correct grammar compared to others. The businesswoman used nine features, with a prominent presence of persuasion through tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, and avoidance of strong swear words. The lawyer exhibited the fewest varieties, using six features, with a notable tendency on emphatic stress, reflecting the assertive and principle-driven nature of the profession. The artist, representing the most expressive and informal role, employed eight out of ten features and showed the highest overall frequency in six of them, namely, lexical hedges and fillers, empty adjectives, intensifiers, superpolite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. The only feature that was not found in use by any of the roles is precise color terms. Furthermore, the patterns observed in this research suggests practical insights into efficient language use along with an enrichment to the study of gendered language within professional contexts.

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