

ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. October-December 2025. Page# 1183-1193

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Gender Differences in Language Use in Professional Settings: A Sociolinguistic Approach

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Abstract

The study examines the issue of gender differences in language use in the workplace, considering how language is employed to convey gender identities and serve as a source of power relations within the workplace. It examines the language differences in patterns of communication between men and women in the workplace in Pakistan. With the help of a sociolinguistic approach, the study defines specific gendered language practices, their contributions to the evolution of professional relationships, and the overall effects of their influence on career advancement. It is a qualitative study with discourse analysis of workplace communication (meetings, emails, reports) and a survey of the professional attitudes to gendered communication. The results indicate that gender is a major factor in determining language, tone, and format of interaction at the workplace, supporting gendered norms and adding to gender inequalities. This paper aims to help readers understand the intersection of gender, language, and professionalism, and to gain experience in creating more inclusive and equitable work environments.

Keywords: Gender, Language Use, Professional Settings, Sociolinguistics, Communication, Gender Differences, Workplace, Power Dynamics

1. Introduction

Not only are professional spaces the locations of action involving performance of tasks but social identities are also built in such spaces, where language matters greatly in negotiating interactions (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007). In sociolinguistic research, gendered communication has received much attention where it has emerged that men and women usually use different linguistic strategies depending on their roles in the society (Ibrahim, 2024). The gender norms influence what is said, as well as how it is said thereby affecting the power relation at the workplace.

The paper examines the effects of gender variance in language application in professional relationships. It discusses the communication by men and women during meetings, writing emails and communicating with colleagues, how language is used as an instrument to uphold and/or subvert professional hierarchies. The following questions are answered in the research:

What are the gender differences in the use of languages in the workplace?

How do these language differences affect work relations and career growth?

How much do organizational norms and power structures determine the linguistic practices of male and female in the work environment?

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of gendered language use in professional contexts in terms of its role in reinforcing societal norms and defining career paths, especially in the organizational communication, leadership, and teamwork context.

Literature Review

Gender and Language

In the past, linguistic research has revealed that men and women speak differently as it is shaped by the norms of the society which establish inappropriate and appropriate words that each gender is expected to use. In her study, Lakoff (1975) hypothesized that the language of women had polite strategies, hedging, and indirectness, as they had a subordinate role in society. Subsequent literature, including those by Holmes (2006) and Tannen (1990), emphasized the use of language by women as the way to build relationships, with men language being dominated by the need to establish authority, control, and power.

The norms of the particular surrounding tend to influence gendered language. In the workplace, where power is the key factor of centrality, language may either support or undermine such hierarchies. As an illustration, Baxter and Angouri (2021) points out that workplace communication practices tend to recreate the greater gendered power structures in the society with women employing more polite and collaborative communicational styles and men more direct and authoritative forms of communication.

Sex Dissimilarities in Work Language

Status and power negotiation is common in professional communication. West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that language can be used as a means of doing gender which implies that men and women carry out gendered roles in speech. These roles may impact on their work identity and relationships at work. Researchers like Baxter (2002) indicate that women are usually faced with the challenge of balancing between their professional authority and the need to be nurturing and cooperative prompting them to use less assertive words than their male counterparts.

On the other hand, leaders who are men are more direct in their speech, which is common to establish dominance and strengthen their leadership. Such a communication difference adds to such gendered power differences in workplaces because often, the contribution of the women they make is undervalued or ignored because of her perceived authority.

Professional Communication and Power

According to Fairclough, (1995) language is not neutral at all; it is a medium through which power can be exercised. In the workplace, the language of men is usually considered as a symbol of power and expertise whereas the language of women is often overlooked as conditional or weaker. The theory of hegemonic masculinity by Connell (2005) also delves into the grammar of hegemony of masculinity thereby revealing the nature of language to legitimize gendered structures of power thus making men to be believed to be competent or qualified to hold leadership positions. Women on the other hand are generally classified as either emotional, nurturing or subservient and this supports the traditional gender roles.

Methodology

This paper is a qualitative research that focuses on exploring the gender variation in the use of language in the working environment. The qualitative data collection methods can be used together to conduct a thorough analysis of the issue.

Qualitative Methodology

Interviews: Face-to-face interviews were carried out with male and female professionals working in the different fields (e.g. healthcare, finance, education and technology). The participants expressed their views about gendered communication at their workplaces and give examples of how gender influences their professional communication.

Discourse Analysis: This involves the qualitative analysis of the transcripts of workplace communication (via meetings, emails and reports) recorded. The analysis will be aimed at determining the patterns of gendered language, in this way, such aspects as politeness strategies, assertiveness, and hedging will be analyzed.

Data Analysis and Findings**Language use in terms of Tone and Assertiveness**

This part of the paper discusses how men and women use language in a professional context in terms of tone and assertiveness. We compare the effects of gender on the tone and the degree of assertiveness in communicative messages, and this is important in determining the perception of authority, competence, and leadership in the workplace. The tone, in this instance, can be defined as a tone expressed by the use of language, and assertiveness is the degree of directness and confidence of people to express their ideas or desires.

To analyze these aspects, data, which are to be analyzed, were collected in different modes of workplace communication and these include emails, meetings as well as reports. These forms of communication are typically used to make professional identity and they are powerful in making the workplace interactions shape out. In this analysis, we shall establish the trends in language use that may be termed to depict gender expectations at the workplace.

Language Use: Tone, Women vs. Men

Tone is an important element of communication that is essential especially in a professional environment. It assists in creating the perception concerning how the message is understood and also the perceived professionalism, competency, and authority of the speaker. Tone can be used in workplaces to keep social

harmony, express respect or assert power. How both men and women use tone, however, may vary considerably because of gendered expectations and social norms.

Women and Tone Politeness and Accommodation

Studies have revealed that the women language is much polite and accommodating than that of men. Professional women tend to hedge, speak indirectly and make mitigating language to soften their claims. This action is due to the social norms in society that women are supposed to be nurturing, accommodating and not confrontational. According to Holmes (2006), the reason why women use politeness strategies in speech is because they are considered care providers and social harmony keepers.

In the data that I gathered in this research, a trend came out conspicuously, in which women in the working environment would often use polite expressions, like Would you mind, I think, or It would be great if in their e-mail messages, in conversations. These expressions are used to make their views less harsh and minimize the possible dispute. As an example, when women responded via email communication on timeframes in a project or when they sought clarification, they were more apt to use language that showed deference or they did not directly request anything. As an illustration, one of the emails of a female manager said:

Hi, in case you are not going to update me on the project status at the end of today, I was wondering whether you could do so? I know, you are looking forward to that time you are busy.

Politeness is expressed in this sentence with the help of hedging (I was wondering, kindly) and the interest in the recipient as to his or her possible workload (I understand you are busy). Although this would be to be cordial and not confrontational, it would as well serve the purpose of diminishing authority of the speaker.

Female Directness and Confidence in Men

Comparatively, men in the workplace would be more direct and assertive, which is also indicative of the social norm that men are expected to be decisive, confident, and in control. Tannen (1990) points out that the communication of men especially in leadership is at times usually characterized by increased level of directness and confidence. The quality of speaking straight to the point can be linked to authority and competence, which are more easily accepted and expected of a male in a workplace setting.

As the data analysis showed, men were not as prone to polite hedging as well as were more likely to use direct language when making requests or giving orders. As an example, a male manager sent his staff an email which stated:

Kindly place the report by 4: 00 PM today.

This sentence is unambiguous and there are no hedging and softening phrases. Although a good way to express the power of the manager and the expectation, it can be perceived as rude or even too dictatorial, depending on the situation and the perception of the receiving person.

During meetings and personal face-to-face communication, the language of men is typically more aggressive, and the aspects of it are less qualified or softened with the help of auxiliaries. Men are more imperative and declarative and state their opinion or decision more confidently. For example, in one of the meetings, a male supervisor stated:

"We need to focus on the bottom line. Let's get this done."

This type of language, while decisive and goal-oriented, can sometimes be perceived as domineering, especially when men employ similar language, as societal expectations often associate assertiveness in men with aggression or emotional instability.

4.2. Assertiveness in Language Use: Women vs. Men

In this study, the term assertiveness means the level of expressing the opinion of individuals, asking for something and supporting the decisions they have made. Professional communication has a very significant aspect, since assertiveness is commonly associated with leadership, decision-making and authority. Gender is important in influencing the expectations of the assertive individuals in the work environment.

Feminine assertiveness: Domesticated or Dominated

The women in the analyzed data were also observed to be less assertive in their language as compared to their male counterparts. The hedging devices and indirect requests were one of the most noticeable ones. Women apply these linguistic strategies in order not to force their will to other people and to keep the social harmony. As an example, women would normally open their suggestions with expressions such as I think, perhaps or maybe during meetings, this being weakened the power of their utterances and diminished their perceived authority. This tendency can be exemplified by an experience of a female employee in a meeting:

I believe that it would be a nice idea to review the budget to align with the new costs, although I am open to all other suggestions.

Although this strategy is polite and non-confrontational, it also weakens the statements of the speaker, making them look less confident and more doubtful. Women would be concerned that they might be judged negatively with regard to their professionalism or leadership capabilities as they would be considered too bold or assertive in their language. According to Lakoff (1975), such patterns of language are indicators of the expectations that women should be accommodating and not assertive in the society.

The persecution of assertiveness in female language is evident mostly where they are in lower rank. When women are in a position of a legitimate authority to command, they normally use more apologetic words. In an example of an email in which a manager is requesting a colleague to perform a task, a female manager may write:

Please excuse me, I am just going to ask, can you complete the report before 5:00 PM today?

This is a good-mannered approach, but it undermines the authority of the speaker since she apologizes beforehand, which is uncommon in the language of male managers holding such a position.

Men's Assertiveness: Direct and Authoritative

On the other hand, men's language was often found to be more direct and assertive. In meetings and written communication, men typically made statements without qualifiers, confidently expressing their opinions, instructions, or goals. For example, a male team leader in a meeting might say:

"We need to finish the task by Friday. It's a priority."

This is plain, straight, and no ambiguity can arise out of this. The aggressiveness and leadership traits that accompany such a language are directness that is often attributed to men using such words. Professionally, such language may create an impression of power and decisiveness, both of which are desired in most leaders.

Males will also tend to dominate conversations, give decisive answers, and state their case without much regard to the level of politeness that a woman is expected to have. This blamelessness is also usually regarded as a good attribute in men, because it is an indication of decisiveness and clarity. Nonetheless, women who utilize the same form of communication can be seen as domineering or abrasive, and this aspect serves to point out the gendering of professional communication.

Assertiveness in Leadership Positions

A study discovered that these gendered patterns of assertiveness were even promoted by the leadership positions. Leadership men tended to be more direct, authoritative in passing decisions, or running their teams. As an illustration, a male CEO said:

Our current efforts are to change our focus to a new market strategy starting in the next quarter. Every department must be in line with this request.

This is an effective form of communication that helps in entrenching the stereotype that leadership involves being assertive and dominant to some degree. Females with the same role tend to evade the use of words which may sound too forceful or aggressive. One of the female CEOs in the same position said:

I believe that we should address the change of our market strategy in the next quarter. How do you feel about this strategy?

Even though this declaration has an idea, it does not sound as much as it leaves a floor open to discussion, unlike their male counterparts who use more assertive language. These contrasts bring forth the genderization of assertiveness in the workplace.

Gender and the Use of Context in Language

The context is extremely important in deciding the tone and assertiveness that is used by both the men and women in the workplace. As it can be seen through the analysis, the assertiveness of men was accepted and appreciated in more formal and hierarchical environments, whereas females still had to exercise some sort of politeness and indirectness. Conversely, the more cooperative tone of women was commonly accepted in an informal or team-based setting and their assertiveness was perceived as less of an issue.

Women might be more questioned when they are assertive in some areas like the tech industry, or engineering, where the culture of the male is the norm. On the contrary, in such sectors as healthcare or education where women constitute a large percentage of employees such a style of communication as assertiveness might be more readily tolerated.

Discussion

This study provides practical implications on the findings regarding the significance of language in the process of enhancing gender relationship within the working place. The main goal of this section is to put the data into the context of the larger sociolinguistic paradigms and analyze how the gendered communication practices preserve the power inequities in the workplace. The analysis has shown important tendencies in language application, specifically related to tone and assertiveness, and the results show that the traditional gender expectations still have an effect on professional communication. These findings will be further expounded in the discussion below in their connection to the sociolinguistic theories on the matter, their implications to

gender equality in the workplace, and recommendations of what can be done to resolve the gendered aspect of communication in the workplace.

Gender and Communication Power Relations

Among the most important conclusions made in this research is that gendered communication promotes power relations in workplace. Language has been found to mediate power, as sociolinguistically, people employ linguistic means to either establish superiority or inferiority in social relations with others. The language of power is normally written or spoken in a direct manner, assertive, and authoritative which are some of the traits that are more easily embraced in the language of men. Conversely, women have to employ more indirect modes of communication e.g. hedging or politeness, and this can result in their ideas being discredited or ignored.

The results of this research substantiate the idea of West and Zimmerman (1987) of doing gender, which underlines the influence of language that demonstrates and supports the gendered expectations. In their theory, gender is not an inborn or biologically defined concept but a performance that is accomplished by social practices, including language. This acting, in the workplace context, is often accompanied by the indirect and cooperative language used by women and assertive and authoritative speech used by men to fulfil their gender roles. The way this gender is done through language is that gender roles in the workplace are not only an extension of natural (biological) variations but an outcome of repeated language and behavioral patterns.

The results of the data analysis show the same trend in the language usage of men and women at work. The language of men is much more straight forward and assertive and this is usually attributed to leadership and power. The two styles of communication can also be associated with how leadership is perceived in society as assertiveness and directness are perceived as competent leaders. The language of women is, however, more polite, deferential and accommodating which are the traditional traits of supportive or subordinate positions. This language separation results in a situation where women are likely to need to bargain their language use to propose authority without breaching the gendering norms. Bias in the society also adds to these gendered communication patterns and assertive women are branded as aggressive or domineering and assertive men are regarded as confident and competent.

Moreover, more extended organizational power structures also affect the fact that women lack assertiveness in their communication. In the hierarchical working environments, men particularly those within the top positions are expected to be decisive and women especially those within the lower ranks find it difficult to reconcile their power with the socialized expectation of femininity. This is in line with the theory of hegemonic masculinity by Connell (2005) who argues that the two concepts of language and power are closely interconnected with the domineering groups employing language to strengthen their status. The results of the study indicate that in most of the occupational settings, especially the male dominated ones, the assertiveness of the men becomes regularized and anything that the women do in an attempt to assert themselves is questioned and condemned even more.

The Tone in the use of Gendered Language

The analysis of the data was greatly focused on the use of tone both direct and indirect, assertive or deferential. Tone does not only indicate the state of emotion or attitude of the speaker but it also has serious social implication in professional communication. It can define the reception of messages, the person who is looked up to and the person who is looked down upon.

The politeness behavior of the women in this paper are in line with the theory of gendered politeness by Holmes (2006) who argues that women, unlike men, use language to create social peace and prevent conflict. This is normally manifested in professional life as hedging tools such as I think, perhaps and would you mind as a means of softening demands and statements. It is possible to negotiate using these politeness strategies to allow women to negotiate using social expectations that they can create good working relationships with their colleagues. But they do it to make their authority weak, and women might find it even more difficult to stand a position at any situation when it requires decisiveness and clarity.

On the other hand, the mild insensitivity of the language that men apply particularly in fields of leadership, has a tendency to enhance their competence and strength. Direct speech is viewed as effective and goal oriented which is valued in the male dominated work environment. This method that is generally connoted with confidence and decisiveness is also closely connected with gender expectations in the working place. The more convincing and decisive nature of the tone used by men in emails, meetings, and reports positively contributes to the fact that they create an image of leadership that is not being frequently challenged, whereas the polite tone used by women can also be regarded as a sign of their deficient confidence or skills.

The observation highlights the doubled bind of women in the workplace that has a gender aspect. By employing a direct or assertive tone women run the risk of being identified to have been aggressive or domineering, which is not what women are supposed to be in society. They are however dismissed when they have a polite indirect tone which they use. That is how the linguistic choices of women are policed according to the social expectations, which restrict their possibilities to communicate successfully and state their authority without any adverse effects.

Organizational and Cultural Influences on Gendered Language Use

The gendered language use and perception is greatly influenced by the workplace culture and organizational norms. In more hierarchically and traditionally structured industries, like finance or engineering, assertiveness and the use of direct language can be interpreted as a manifestation of professionalism but are more easily adopted in the communication of men. The female employees of these industries might experience more difficulties in using aggressive words without criticism. Nevertheless, in a more collaborative and participative work environment, e.g. in the education or healthcare sector, women are allowed to exercise their power in a more non-aggressive and non-unprofessional way.

This cultural difference demonstrates that context is an important factor that affects gendered communication. Corporate cultures with their values of aggressive competitiveness and dominance may be less flexible to feminine linguistic characteristics, and any industry with a stronger value of empathy, cooperation, and

collaboration may permit women more freedom to exercise authority in a more compatible manner with their language expression.

In addition, organizational patterns of gendered communication are not influenced solely by organizational norms but they are also influenced by more general factors in society. Indicatively, in Pakistan, as is the case in many other societies, gender roles are realized as deeply rooted both in society and in the work place. Women have to act in a humiliating or supportive position, even in business settings. On the contrary, men are pushed to play leadership positions and speak with courage and assertiveness. Such social constructs can be observed in the use of language in the work environment as women are commonly subject to negotiation of linguistic activities so that they would not be seen as too assertive or violent.

Gender Intersectionality with other Social Factors

Although the primary focus of the given study is gender, it is worth noting that the use of gendered language does not take place in a vacuum. It overlaps with other forms of social factors, including race, class, ethnicity, and age, which will either reinforce or address the gendered expectations of people at the workplace.

To use the example, women of color in the workplace can encounter even more challenges when it comes to communication, as not only do they have to deal with gendered expectations but also racial stereotypes. The set of pressure that working-class women have to endure can be quite different, too, than the one upper-class women have to face. Women leaders may also be challenged on their own, as leadership weaknesses can be applied against them and not their male counterparts. This intersectionality is crucial in the achievement of the full complexity of gendered linguistic use of language at workplaces.

Based on the findings of the research, the language usage of women is best accounted by the system of interdependent social influences and their communication patterns cannot be fully described without mentioning the processes that are more global. The future research can be devoted to the interplay of different influences of identity to identify the effect on the professional communication styles and the perception of women regarding their authority in the workplace.

Gender Equality in the Workplace Implications

This study has strong implications of augmenting gender equality in the workplace. As it is argued in the discussion, the issue of gendered language use is related to the preservation of power relations, where women should use language that may undermine their power, whereas the aggressiveness of men is viewed as a sign of competence in most instances. These patterns of language are not just remedies of gendered behavior, they actively tend to support gender inequality at the workplace.

To resolve these problems, it is advisable that organisations should facilitate gender-neutral communication habits and negate the conventions of gendered language use. This can include training workers about ways of recognizing and reducing unconscious bias in words, teaching women how to use more direct communication styles, and developing a working environment that encourages a variety of communication patterns. Moreover, gender-equity policies have to be implemented as well to push organisations to reflect on the role of language in underpinning gender-based systems of power and strive toward more active initiatives of creating more inclusive standards of communication.

Summary of Findings

The gendered language of the work place is one of the most important discoveries of this research. The language of men emerged to be more straightforward, aggressive and assertive and these are qualities that are normally related to leadership and competence regarding the workplace. Men's language in emails, meetings and in face to face communications are usually straightforward, to the point and unambiguous which is usually seen as effective, competent and professional. This form of communication that is mostly rewarded in a male dominated workplace environment is a form of communication that suits the societal ideal that leadership must be decisive and clear.

On the other hand, the language of the women was more polite, indirect and accommodating. The hedging, mitigation and politeness as the feminine linguistic features are often employed by women to dilute the request, suggestion or order. Although these tactics can assist women to manage socialization and maintain good relations with their workmates and other partners, they compromise their perceived power and can diminish their visibility and influence at work. This fact goes in line with the findings of Holmes (2006) who notes that women tend to employ language more to preserve social harmony and prevent conflict, which is perceived to be less authoritative in the workplace.

The paper has also demonstrated the gendered double bind of women in professional communication. Women will run the risk of being considered as aggressive, bossy or overbearing, which is unacceptable in the social setting of women. On the other hand, they might be seen as less authoritative by using more polite or accommodating words hence they cannot exercise their power and influence to be seen as leaders. This paradox is especially evident in the context of leadership, as women have to juggle aggressiveness and the need to remain polite and deferential at all times.

It also reveals in the findings that the organizational context is significant in how the gendered communication is developed. Such male dominative and hierarchical fields such as the world of finance or technology, directness and assertiveness in communication is a trait more easily accepted in men and women may have greater difficulty acquiring these qualities without criticism or marginalization. Conversely, industries that are more collaborative or service-based, like education or healthcare, might have more space to provide the woman with power without any backlash to the same extent. Those differences highlight how the organizational culture affects the communication practice and how the gendered expectations not only become internalized in social norms but also shaped by the workplace.

Concluding Thoughts

To sum up, this paper has demonstrated that gender distinctions in the language utilization in the work place are entrenched in social conventions and organizational culture. Women are more polite and accommodating in their language and this may weaken their professional authority, whereas men are more direct and assertive so that their authority as leaders is strengthened. The linguistic differences that are being discussed do not only mirror the personal tendencies of communication, but they are also influenced by the larger forces of the society and culture, that reinforce the traditional gender roles.

In order to promote gender equality at the workplace, organizations should accept the contribution of language to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and take the initiative of embracing more inclusive communication styles. To overcome this it is necessary to have an appreciation of both assertive and collaborative forms of communicative style and also have the reduction of non-conscious biases that undermine the voice of women. In such a way, organizations will be able to promote more balanced work settings where employees of both sexes will be able to communicate efficiently, exercise power, and succeed in the professional sphere.

The results of the study show that further research on the intersectionality of gender and language and the ways in which organizational culture can affect the communication practices is justifiable. Investigations in the future will probably contribute to our knowledge of how language reflects and recreates gendered hierarchies in the workplace, thus informing the creation of more inclusive and equitable workplaces to overcome the shortcomings in the current study.

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