

Gender differences in the use of adjectives and intensifiers essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



1. Introduction

The investigation of male and female speech differences is a major topic in sociolinguistics. The literature on this issue is vast; it has been one of the biggest within sociolinguistics in recent years. A number of linguists have investigated this field of study; among them Robin Lakoff (1975), Janet Holmes (2001), Deborah Tanen (1990), Jennifer Coates (1998), Susan U. Philips (1980) and others.

2. Theoretical background

Robin Lakoff (1975) is one of the first linguists to address gender directly the topic of language. Lakoff describes the features of language differentiating men's and women's speech which she thinks makes women's speech less powerful than men's (Philips, 1980). These features are the following:

1. Women use vocabulary items that men do not use. Lakoff uses mauve as an example.
2. Female speakers use more "empty" adjectives, like divine, cute, and sweet.
3. Women use question forms in environments where men would use declaratives.
4. Women use more polite forms, like "please" and "thank you".
5. Women use more "hedges," or forms that convey uncertainty, like well, you know, I guess, I think, I wonder.
6. Female speakers tend to apply the intensive "so" more, as in "I'm so hungry," and later Lakoff added other intensifiers like very and really as more typical of women.
7. Women tend to use "hypercorrect" grammar, so they were less likely than men to say ain't and drop the ends of words as in doin' and goin' (Philips, 1980: 532).

In another article Lakoff (1973) states that women use colour terms like mauve, beige, aquamarine, lavender and magenta. She maintains that adjectives such as adorable, charming, divine, lovely and sweet are

commonly used by women but only very rarely by men. “ Lakoff also pointed out that women have their own vocabulary for emphasizing certain effects on them, with such words and expressions like so good, such fun, exquisite, lovely, precious, divine, adorable, darling and fantastic” (Wardhaugh, 2002: 318).

The studies mentioned above focus on the gender differences in the use of adjectives. Another field of research is the use of intensifiers in men’s and women’s speech. „ Intensifiers are adverbs (e. g. pretty, really, so, totally, incredibly, very, super, real, etc.) that boost or maximize meaning, they scale the quality of an adjective or adverb up.: I think it is pretty exciting. Oh, Janine, the really hot dancer girl. And this is so weird” (Roberts & Tagliamonte 2005: 280). As intensifiers change, rather quickly they provide a good place to observe linguistic change. They are subject to fashion. They reflect the speaker’s desire to be original or to enhance the novelty of his or her expressions (Roberts & Tagliamonte, 2005)

The notion of intensifiers was analyzed by many researchers; according to Olsson (2000), intensifiers act as a boosting device in language. However, Lakoff (1975) categorized intensifiers as part of hedging where it weakens the feelings of the speaker in language; these are: quite, rather, so, too, really, just, such (Amir et. al. 2012).

Number of researchers like Roberts & Tagliamonte (2005), Olsson (2000), Johnson and Roen (1992), Kuha (2005) Herbert (1990) have investigated intensifiers based on how differently they are used in male and female

interactions. One of the studies in this field examined the differences in language use by 4 male and female Malaysian teenage bloggers who use blogs as a diary to express their daily issues about life. The findings show that there are differences between male and female bloggers in the frequencies of five language features which are intensifiers, hedging, tag questions, empty adjectives and adverbs. The frequency of occurrences of intensifiers was higher in blogs written by females (n= 388) than in those written by males (n= 157) (Amir, 2012). As for the empty adjectives the overall data showed that female bloggers used them more (n= 239) than male bloggers (n= 92) (Amir et. al., 2012). Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) investigated adjectives, as the most frequently intensified forms of language. The corpus they used was comprised of transcripts of the American sitcom Friends. Overall 900 intensifiable adjectives have been found out of which 22% was intensified.

According to the study three intensifiers were dominant in Friends very (14, 2%), really (24, 6%) and so (44, 1%). It has been observed that women generally tend to use more intensification. Female characters used so and really more frequently than male characters. This could be explained by the fact that women use more “ emotional language” was confirmed. This can also explain by the frequent use of these adjectives encoding emotions or physical attributes or other qualities e. g.: so jealous, so glad, really freaked, really important/small/great etc. (Roberts & Tagliamonte 2005). Intensifiers are widely used in compliments (Herbert, 1990) and apologies (Cohen and Olshtain 1981). Studies of compliments support the suggestion that women’s

compliments tend to be expressed with linguistically stronger forms than men's. Having analysed over one thousand American compliments, Hebert (1990) reported that only women used the stronger form and they used them most often to other women. In written peer reviews, Johnson and Roen (1992) noted that women use significantly more intensifiers (such as really, very, particularly) than men.

The same results were reported by Herbert (1990) who came to the conclusion women intensified their compliments most when writing to other women (Coates, 1988). The investigation of sex-related speech in court made by O'Barr and Atkins (1980) also confirmed previous claims on women's language. They found that women's speech at the court (North California, superior criminal court) contain a high frequency of intensifiers (very close friend, quiet ill and often with intonation emphasis); hedges (you know, sort of like, let's see etc.); empty adjectives (this very kind policeman) and other similar features (O'Barr, Atkins 1980: 381). A gender differences has been observed in the choice of specific intensifiers.

According to Bradac, Mulac and Thompson's (1995) study – " some intensifiers, such as " really" and " so", are more likely to be used by women while men have preference for " very" and " real", were more likely to be used by men" (Kuha, 2005: 218). The findings of Kuha's (2005) study also supported that intensifier so is associated with the speech of young female speakers and these results were replicated by Bauer and Bauer's (2002) on young New Zealanders (Kuha, 2005). We can see that research on the use of adjectives and intensifiers is quite extensive and it is still growing. From the

studies mentioned above we can also conclude that men and women have preference for different adjectives and there are both qualitative differences in the way they use intensification. 3. Research Questions and Hypothesis

The research questions I expect to solve in this research are the following:

(1) Are there any differences between men's and women's speech in the way they use adjectives adjective usage? (2) Which adjectives are the most frequent ones in male and in female interactions? (3) Do women use more intensifiers than men?

(4) Are the intensifiers so, really and very more typical for women? Based on relevant literature my hypotheses the next 4:

(1) Women use far more adjectives than men do.

(2) Women use more „ empty” adjectives such as cute, sweet, nice, lovely, good.

(3) Women tend to use significantly more intensifiers than men.

(4) The intensifiers so, really and very are more typical for female speech. 4.

Data and Method

The data I analysed was drawn from the American sitcom Friends created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman. The series revolves around a group of friends in Manhattan. It features six main characters: Rachel Green, Monica Geller, Phoebe Buffay, Ross Geller, Chandler Bing and Joey Tribbiani.

I have analysed the transcripts of Season 1 which includes 24 episodes. The transcript of one part was 4-5 pages long and contained approximately 4,425 words.

Using quantitative and statistical methods I tried to find answers for my research questions. Reading the transcripts of 24 episodes I counted the number of adjectives and intensifiers, used by each character. After counting the items mentioned above I compared the results described in the following section. 3. Research Results

The total number of adjectives in the corpus is 615 out of which 314 were used by female and 301 by male characters. Figure1 shows these results in percentages from which we can see that there are only slight quantitative differences in the use of adjectives by men and women.

Figure1: Gender differences in the use of adjectives

It was also interesting to examine which adjectives were most frequently used in male and female interaction.

Figure 2: Most frequent adjectives in women's speech

From the Figure 2 we can see that the most frequently used adjectives (in descending order) among women characters were great (n= 36), good (n= 19), nice and little (n= 18). As a results show Lakoff's claim that women use more „ empty" adjectives (see p. 4) seems to be supported because good and nice are identified as „ empty" adjectives. Other „ empty" adjectives were also present in female's speech such as sweet (n= 9) and cute (n= 14), but their occurrences were not so high. Women used adjectives denoting colours very rarely, just two colour terms have been found in Rachel's speech: blonde and blue. Female characters tend to use standard forms of language, which is justified by the fact that only non-standard word has

found in the data namely, very relationshipy. As Rot (1988) states it the suffix -e(y) is adjectival suffix which creates slang an adjectives typically used by American people (p. 65). The list of adjectives used by female characters is illustrated in Appendix 1.

Figure 3: Most frequent adjectives in men's speech

As we can see in Figure 3 the adjectives big (n= 25), great (n= 24) and little (n= 21) had the highest occurrence in the speech of male characters. These results also show that they used no “ empty” adjectives (see p. 4). Adjectives denoting colours (e. g. red and burgudny) but these had a very low occurrence. From the Figure 3 we can also conclude that men preferred adjectives external properties (e. g. big) but examples for more emotional adjectives (e. g. great, little) were also present. The list of adjectives used by male characters is provided in Appendix 2.

In the second phase of my research I investigated the use of intensifiers in the speech of male and female characters. Overall 145 intensified adjectives have been found out of which men used 45, while women 100. The overall rate of intensification was 23. 6%.

Figure 4: Gender differences in the overall rate of intensifiers

Based on the results mentioned above we can conclude that hypothesis (3) that women tend to use significantly more intensifiers than men is confirmed. Male characters used intensifiers significantly fewer cases than female characters did.

10 types of intensifiers were found within the data which shown in Figure5 based on their distribution in the speech of men and women.

Figure 5: Intensifiers used by male and female characters

As Figure 5 points out, three intensifiers were dominant in the speech of both genders, namely so, really and very. The results clearly illustrate that female characters generally used more intensifiers than men. The intensifiers so and really had the highest frequency among women. Other intensifiers like very, pretty and too were less frequent forms within female interactions. Thus, we can conclude that the hypothesis that intensifiers so, really and very are more typical for female speech seems to be partly verified. It is also clear from Figure 5 that some intensifiers (e. g. horribly and totally) occurred only in women's speech.

As to men's interaction Figure 5 clearly shows that three intensifiers were dominant in their speech, namely so, very and pretty. The intensifiers really and too had a lower rate of frequency. Just intensifiers real and perfectly were favoured only by male speakers. Reduplication of intensifiers was also present in my data and was used by both genders, as illustrated by examples 1-2. Example 1: Chandler: Yes, I know, as it happens my room is very very close to the parade route. Example 2: Chandler: Finally, I figure I'd better answer it, and it turns out it's my mother, which is very-very weird, because- she never calls me! Intensifications containing negation have also been found in the data such as: really no easy, really not happy, but they only occurred in the speech of Monica. Example 4: Monica: Now I'm guessing that he bought her the big pipe organ, and she's really not happy about it.

Examples 5: Monica: Okay. It's-it's about Alan. There's something that you should know. I mean, there's really no easy way to say this.. uh.. I've decided to break up with Alan. 4. Conclusion

Based on my research results, I can claim that women use more adjectives than men do, although the qualitative differences are not significant. My results also seem to support Lakoff's claim as that women use more „empty” adjectives, because good and nice were among the three most frequent adjectives used by the female characters. In contrast, there were no examples for „empty” adjectives in the interactions of male characters.

On the basis of my data we can conclude that there are gender differences in the use of intensifiers. Comparing the number of intensifiers used by men (n= 45) and women (n= 100) the hypothesis that the latter tend to use significantly more intensifiers than men do seems to be confirmed. The intensifiers so and really were used frequently among women. The hypothesis that intensifiers like so, really and very are more typical for female speech seems to be true in the case of so and really, but not for very.

Overall it can be claimed that there are both qualitative and quantitative differences in the use of adjectives and intensifiers in the speech of the male and female characters I analysed.

References

1. Amir, Z., Anidin, H., Saadiyah, D., Kemboja, I., (2012). Gender Differences In The Language Use Of Malaysian Teen Bloggers. Journal of Language

Studies Volume 12, pp. 106-124. 2. Bauer, L., & Bauer, W. (2002). Adjective boosters in the English of young New Zealanders. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 30 (3), pp. 244-257. 3. Bradac, J., Mulac, A., & Thompson, S. (1995). Men's and women's use of intensifiers and hedges in problem-solving interaction: Molar and molecular analyses. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 28, pp. 93-116. 4. Coates, J.(1998). *Language and Gender: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. 5. Cohen, A. D. and Olshtain, E. (1981). Developing a measure of sociocultural competence: The case of apology. *Language Learning* 31, 113-134. 6. Herbert, R. K. (1990). Sex-based Differences in Compliment Behaviour. *Language in Society*, pp. 201-224. 7. Holmes J. (1988). Complimenting – A positive Strategy (100-118). In: Coates, J.(1998). *Language and Gender: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. 8. Holmes, J. (2001). *An introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 2nd Edition. Harlow: Longman. 9. Johnson, D. M. and Roen, D. H. (1992). Complimenting and involvement in peer reviews: gender variation. *Language in Society*, pp. 27-57. 10. Kuha, M. (2005). Investigating the Spread of “ so” as an Intensifier: Social and Structural Factors. *Ball State University, Texas Linguistic Forum* 48, pp. 217-226. 11. Lakoff, R. (1973). *Language and Woman's Place*. *Language in Society*, Vol. 2, pp. 45-80. 12. Laikoff, R. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row. 13. O'Barr, W. and Atkins, B. K. (1980). 'Women's language' or 'powerless language'? In: Coates, J.(1998). *Language and Gender: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. 14. Olsson, L. (2000). A study of gender-related differences in introductory letters. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Lulea Tekniska Universitet. (Online) Retrieved 21October 2011, from <http://epubl.luth.se/1402-1773/2000/62/LTU-CUPP-0062-SE.pdf>

15. Sándor, R. (1991). *Non-Standard English (Lexis)*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó. 16. Susan U. P. (1980). *Sex Differences and Language*. Reviewed work: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 9, pp. 523-544. 17. Tagliamonte, S. and Roberts, C. (2005). *So Weird; So Cool; So Innovative: The Use of Intensifiers in the Television Series Friends*. *American Dialect Society Annual Meeting*, Boston, pp. 280-300. 18. Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand. Women and Men in Conversation*. New-York: William Morrow. 19. Wardhaugh, R. (2002). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

[2]. Olsson (2000) considers adorable, nice, gorgeous, wonderful, charming, sweet, lovely, cute, divine, marvelous, delightful, brilliant, beautiful, awful, good and fantastic as examples of empty adjectives (Amir, et. al. 2012: 117).