



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 19 | Issue 1

Article 21

4-2-1993

Gender Variation in the Rejection of Absurd Requests

Bequi Martindale

Todd Durrant

Myra Durrant

Karin Hahn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Martindale, Bequi; Durrant, Todd; Durrant, Myra; and Hahn, Karin (1993) "Gender Variation in the Rejection of Absurd Requests," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 21. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol19/iss1/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Gender Variation in the Rejection of Absurd Requests

Bequi Martindale
Todd Durrant
Myra Durrant
Karin Hahn
Brian Jensen
Melissa Proffitt

I. Introduction

Researchers in diverse fields of study are interested in possible differences between men and women. Gender differences in language, for example, have been studied in many different contexts. Deborah Tannen (1990), among others, describes characteristics of "men's speech" and "women's speech" that seem to accurately represent the speaking techniques peculiar to each sex. Do these typical patterns apply even when speakers are faced with an atypical situation? This study attempts to answer this question by examining gender differences in responses to an unreasonable request.

II. Review of the Literature

Our research first attempted to identify certain characteristics of male and female speech which could be empirically studied. Maltz andorker (1982) stated that women ask more questions, and use more minimal responses such as "mm hmm" inserted throughout their speech, than do men. Robin Lakoff (1973) suggests that women are more likely to use tag questions when speaking, either because of insecurity or a desire to "give the addressee leeway, not forcing him to go along with the views of the speaker" (54). Also, Shimanoff (1983) says that men's and women's verbal expression may differ depending on the sex of their hearer. We also examined studies, not necessarily related to gender, about requests and responses. One study (Goffman 1981) showed that the expected response to a request by a stranger would be either 1) granting the request or 2) giving a reason for not granting the request. In addition, according to Labov (1979), if A requests something of B, the request will be seen as valid only if B believes (and believes that A believes) four conditions:

1. That the action should be done;
2. that B has the ability to do it;
3. that B has the obligation to do it; and
4. that A has the right to tell B to do it.

If any of these preconditions is obviously missing, the request becomes a joke (59).

Based on this research, we hypothesized that in response to a request which violates one or more of the above conditions, women would refuse less frequently, ask more questions, answer more indirectly, and give more reasons for their refusal than men.

III. Research Methodology

Our first research method (asking randomly selected subjects to let us cut off some of their hair) was abandoned because it was too irrational; the subjects guessed that it was research and their replies were prejudiced. In our second and final method, we asked students (while they were studying) to complete an oral survey, which seemed ordinary enough that none of them would suspect ulterior motives. This survey, however, was 30 pages long, and we told the subjects it would take approximately two hours to complete. The request violated 3 of the 4 Labovian principles listed above: the subjects didn't have the time, and therefore didn't have the ability, to do it; they were not obligated to do it; and the researcher had no right to tell them to do it.

Our study consisted of responses collected from 80 students, 40 male and 40 female, selected at random from people studying in the Harold B. Lee Library on March 28, 1993, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. 20 men and 20 women were approached by female researchers, and the other half by male researchers; therefore, we ended up with four groups of twenty people each. These groups will be

Todd Durrant is a music major from Utah. Myra Durrant is an English major from Idaho. Karin Hahn is a pre-physical therapy major from Connecticut. Brian Jensen is an open major from Utah. Bequi Martindale is a communication studies major from Colorado. Melissa Proffitt is an English secondary education major from Texas. All attend Brigham Young University.

referred to by the sexes of the participants, with the subject listed first; so a response labeled "MS-FR" means a male subject responding to the request made by a female researcher.

To gather our data, we worked in pairs. One person (the observer) stationed him- or herself near the subject, who was the third student away from the last student approached. The other person (the researcher) then asked the subject to complete a survey, using approximately the following formula:

"Excuse me. I'm doing a research project. Would you do this survey? It shouldn't take more than two hours. These are the questions I'll be asking you" (showing survey).

The observer recorded the subject's response using a checklist of important possible response features, including directness, questions, filler words (such as "ummm"), polite words, and tag questions. Responses were coded by a mark for every time a feature was used, and a note of the specific response if possible. The observer also recorded any interesting or unusual points about the encounter, under "Comments." When the subject finished responding, the researcher moved on and the process was repeated.

IV. Results

Directness

We were interested in seeing which gender would be more direct in their responses to a ridiculous request, and which gender of researchers would receive those direct responses. We found that 50% of male subjects were direct in their responses, while only 20% of females acted in like manner. Nearly twice as many female researchers received direct responses as males did. Who was being direct to whom? Males had a greater tendency not only to be more direct, but to give direct responses to women researchers. Female subjects were rarely direct, but when they were, they too chose to be so with female researchers instead of males.

Refusal

Only in some cases did the subject respond with a simple "no," which we considered a flat refusal. Out of 20 male subjects responding to female researchers, 35% said "no." Male subjects also said "no" in 25% of their encounters with male researchers. However, not once did a female subject say "no" to a male researcher, and only 4 females out of 20 gave such refusals to other women.

Agreement

The percentage of subjects who agreed at any point of the conversation to carry out the ridiculous request was small. Though more men gave refusals to women, the men also gave more positive responses to women than in any other data group. Half as many females agreed to a male's request,

and only two males agreed to another male. Only one female agreed to another female. The subjects clearly agreed more frequently to the request when it was presented by someone of the opposite sex.

Fillers

The greatest use of fillers was by male subjects to female researchers. This could indicate that male subjects were more uncertain, or more unwilling to refuse, when speaking to a female researcher. When a male subject was speaking to another male, however, that number dropped dramatically. In short, men were more likely to be affected by the sex of the hearer when using fillers; for women subjects, the sex of the hearer made no difference.

Questions

Males in general were more likely to ask questions. This was the exact opposite of our hypothesis, which suggested that women would ask more questions. One possible reason for this might be that the men felt that the "surveyor" gave too little information about the request, but this is only one reason. Since Maltz and Borker (1982) stated quite strongly that women tend to ask more questions, this result could indicate an area for future research. Also, women subjects were more likely to ask questions of male researchers than female researchers, indicating that women employ different, more tentative language when speaking to men than to women.

Politeness

On the whole, women used more polite phrases than men; but more significant is the fact that there was a "sex identification" in the use of polite phrases. Subjects tended to be more polite when speaking to members of the same sex, and women were by far the most polite to other women.

V. Conclusion

We set out to examine gender-related differences only in responses to irrational requests, but our results revealed that this area of research offers a variety of possibilities. While it may be tempting to generalize about speech characteristics of men and women, the exceptions to those generalizations show that there is still a lot to learn. Our research raised more questions than we had planned to answer. We discovered that several variables affected the responses we recorded. Accidentally changing our request from "Can you do this survey?" to "Can I ask you a few questions?" caused the number of affirmative responses to increase dramatically. In fact, even when those subjects finally realized what the request actually was, some of them still agreed to do the survey, suggesting that the subjects were unwilling to change their "yes" answer to "no." Also, we observed that the length, complexity, and politeness of the subjects' responses varied according to the *researcher's* politeness—something we

were not prepared to study in this project, but which might be an interesting topic for further research.

Other possibilities for research, as suggested by our observations, include studying non-verbal communication as well as verbal; performing the same study in an area where survey-takers are not as commonplace as they are at BYU; and changing the research method so that other markers of "male" or "female" speech, such as tag questions and expression of emotion, would be more present in responses. Also, the results indicating that men, not women, asked more questions could be researched more. For example, we were not able, in the scope of this project, to study the purpose of the questions. If questions were present to aid communication, fewer questions could indicate more efficient communication—which would affect how we look at communication between the sexes.

VI. Bibliography

Goffman, E. (1981) *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Labov, W. (1979) "The study of language in social context." In *Language and Social Context*, ed. P. Giglioli, New York: Penguin, 283-307.

Lakoff, R. (1973) "Language and Woman's Place." *Language in Society*, 2, 1, April 1973, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Maltz, D. N. and Borker, R. A. (1982) "A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication." In J. J. Gumperz (ed.) *Language and Social Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Shimanoff, S. B. (1983) "The Role of Gender in Linguistic References to Emotive States." *Communication Quarterly*, 31, 2, Spring 1983, 174-179.

Tannen, D. (1990) *You Just Don't Understand*. New York: Ballantine Books.