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Gender Variation in the Rejection of Absurd Requests

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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

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

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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. Re- 
sponses were coded by a mark for every time a fea-
ture was used, and a note of the specific response if 
possible. The observer also recorded any interest-
ing or unusual points about the encounter, under 
"Comments." When the subject finished respond-
ing, 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 ridicu-
los 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 re-
searchers, 35% said "no." Male subjects also said 
"no" in 25% of their encounters with male research-
ers. 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 ridicu-
los request was small. Though more men gave re-
fusals 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,
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


