

Men's Language: A Study of the Discourse of the LINGUIST List

Susan Herring

University of Texas, Arlington

Despite a flurry of recent research on language and gender, the communicative strategies of men have received little direct attention. If described at all, men's language is characterized in negative terms, i.e. as lacking the features of women's language. Alternatively, it is idealized on the basis of cultural stereotypes, as in Lakoff's (1990: 205) definition of men's language as "the language of the powerful: ... direct, clear, and succinct, as would be expected of those who need not fear giving offense". The present paper is a first step toward characterizing men's language in its own terms, as it is actually used.

The data for this investigation come from the LINGUIST electronic discussion list, a multi-participant forum for the academic discussion of linguistics. Electronic discourse is an ideal modality in which to investigate gendered language exclusive of its interactional and prosodic components. It is less edited than most other forms of written discourse, while being easier to obtain and analyze than spontaneous conversation. Typically, the sex of contributors is evident from their names. Other sex-related signals — from handwriting to posture and dress — are absent, however, such that the only other indications of a contributor's sex reside in the texts themselves.

In order to get a representative sampling of LINGUIST discourse, I examined three segments: all messages posted during a random two-week period (May 30 - June 12, 1992), and two extended discussions of specific linguistics-related issues. The first of these, which took place in February - March of 1991, concerned the use of the term "cognitive linguistics" by different schools of linguistic thought. The second, seven months later, concerned the emergence of new feminine noun endings in French, with specific reference to the word "professeure". Table 1 shows participation by sex for the total corpus.

Table 1: Participation on LINGUIST

	participants	messages	words	avg. words/msg.
Men	79%	80%	88%	332.2
Women	21%	20%	12%	170.3
Both	N=164	N=261	N=78,131	299.3

As table 1 shows, men contribute the overwhelming majority of messages on LINGUIST. Their messages are also, on the average, nearly twice as long as those of women. Thus the first characteristic of "men's language" in this corpus

is that there is **more of it**.¹ This observation corroborates the results of research on gender differences in spoken language, which shows that men consistently talk more than women in public settings (Holmes 1992).

Postings on LINGUIST can be grouped into five functional categories: informational (e.g. conference and job announcements), discussion of issues, queries, personal (talk about linguists, as opposed to linguistics), and miscellaneous. The "cognitive linguistics" and "professecure" discussions are examples of discussions of issues, while the two-week period includes postings of all five functional types. The distribution of message functions by sex for the two-week period is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Functional distribution of messages over a random two-week period

	Issues	Info.	Queries	Personal	Misc.	Total messages
Men	46.5%	20.2%	16.7%	11.4%	5.3%	100% N=114
Women	24.0%	12.0%	28.0%	32.0%	4.0%	100% N= 25

Men contribute most in discussions of issues, while women contribute most on personal topics.² Men also contribute more information, while women ask proportionately more questions. LINGUIST men are thus more likely than women to engage in debate, and to present themselves as authorities on a subject.

The remainder of my investigation focuses on the use of men's language in the "cognitive linguistics" and "professecure" discussions. By "men's language", I intend a stylistic variety conventionally recognizable by other fluent speakers of the culture as having been produced by a male. As such, "men's language" contrasts with "women's language" (also a marked, conventional variety) on the one hand, and with a more or less sex-neutral style on the other. The following linguistic and rhetorical features were hypothesized to be characteristic of "men's language" and "women's language" on the basis of previous observations of gender differences in academic electronic discourse (Herring 1992).

(1)	<u>men's language</u>	<u>women's language</u>
	strong assertions	attenuated assertions
	self-promotion	apologies
	presuppositions	explicit justifications
	rhetorical questions	true questions
	authoritative tone	personal tone
	challenges others	supports others
	humor/irony	

Each message in the two extended discussions was coded for the presence or absence of the above features, and categorized as representing one of four styles: marked for **men's** language features only; **women's** language features only; **both** men's and women's language features; or **neither** men's or women's language features (sex-neutral or unmarked style). Table 3 below relates message style to contributor sex for each discussion, and for both discussions combined. The results show that both men and women use all styles. However, men are more than two-and-a-half times as likely to use men's language only, and women are more likely to use women's language only. More strikingly, women are more than **three** times as likely to use a mixed sex style. Including the mixed style, two-thirds of the messages produced by women (as compared with only one-third of those by men) use one or more women's language features. These observations support the hypothesis that the features in (1) above are characteristic of men's and women's language, at least in academic discourse.

Table 3: Sex-based styles

		men's lg. only	both mens' & wm's lg.	neither (neutral)	women's lg only	Total messages
Cog Ling	men	50.9%	22.6%	15.1%	11.3%	100% N=53
	women	26.3%	52.6%	10.5%	10.5%	100% N=19
Prof	men	43.6%	2.6%	28.2%	20.8%	100% N=39
	women	0%	33.3%	22.2%	44.4%	100% N= 9
Both	men	47.8%	14.1%	20.7%	17.4%	100% N=92
	women	17.9%	46.4%	14.3%	21.4%	100% N=28

The necessity for women to mix styles comes about because academic discourse is based on (an idealized version of) men's discourse. Making and challenging strong assertions is the very foundation of the Western dialectic tradition, and is a valued means for attaining knowledge. What is **not** part of the assertive ideal, but which nevertheless forms part of academic practice, is the rhetorical domination and intimidation of one's opponent. When the "men's language only" messages from the two discussions are subjected to a qualitative analysis, a surprising number of dominance strategies are revealed. These can be grouped into three general categories: self-aggrandizement, attacks on others, and coerced assent.

Self-aggrandizement on LINGUIST takes various forms: citing oneself excessively or inappropriately (if it is ever appropriate to cite oneself in an informal discussion group), lavishly praising an organization or school of linguistics that one was instrumental in founding, commenting explicitly on how important and/or well-connected one is, quoting portions of one's own previous postings, etc. A related phenomenon is what one LINGUIST subscriber referred to as "throwing bibliographies at one another" — the citing of references, often incomplete and/or obscure, as a means of demonstrating how well-read one is on a given topic. One effect of such usage is to silence any possible objection — one dares not take issue with the claims associated with the reference without having actually read it, even though the lack of explicit information may make it nearly impossible to do so.

More intimidating yet is the adversarial **attack**, whereby one participant belittles or ridicules another for something he or she contributed to the discussion. While there are as many methods of attack as there are aggressors, several strategies recur: the direct put-down ("I suggest you acquire some expertise on the matter before making such sweeping statements"), "sugaring the sucker" (Botha 1989) — saying something flattering or conciliatory before launching a critical attack —, and ridicule through sarcasm. Of these, sarcasm is the most devastating, since it is more difficult to respond to a criticism that was implicated "off-record" than one stated overtly.

Finally, dominant participants **coerce** readers into implicit assent by embedding potentially contentious claims in presuppositions (what Hoey (1984) terms "the Emperor's new clothes gambit"). One such strategy involves the ubiquitous "of course", which signals not so much that the writer's statement is obvious to the reader, but that the reader ought to feel stupid if it is not (Poplack 1992). Examples of this use of "of course", and its closely related cousins "it is clear/obvious that", abound in the discussions analyzed here, and in academic discourse more generally.

The combined effect of these three general strategies is to intimidate many would-be participants into silence. A subscriber who dares comment on an issue

under discussion runs the risk of having his or her contribution challenged, perhaps aggressively so.³ And to disagree with someone who is *obviously* more knowledgeable and important than you would be to expose your own ignorance. The adversarial writer may in fact be wrong — but who would dare challenge him? Additional support for the silencing hypothesis comes from the results of a survey described in Herring (1992), in which 70% of LINGUIST subscribers surveyed indicated that they did not participate in the "cognitive linguistics" debate because they felt intimidated and/or annoyed by its adversarial tone. Women are especially susceptible to intimidation of this sort, in that they do not receive the same early assertiveness training as men.

It may be objected that the abuses illustrated here are rare; the majority of linguists, after all, are civil, conscientious scholars, and a significant number employ no "men's language" features of any sort in their postings. Indeed, dominance strategies are disproportionately clustered in the postings of only four to six percent of the participants (all but one of them male). However, these participants are also far and away the most frequent contributors: they are responsible for 33% and 51% of the words in the "cognitive linguistics" and the "professeure" discussions, respectively — more than eight times the participant average. They monopolize large portions of the message space, and thus their adversarial rhetoric significantly affects the tone of the discourse as a whole.

Brittan (1989: 204) observes that "violence is often hidden behind a rhetorical smokescreen — it is couched in the language of academic 'one upsmanship'". We can value forthright assertiveness in men's language, while rejecting adversariality as undesirable. If nothing else, an awareness of the differences between the two can better equip us to recognize intimidating strategies for what they are, and avoid being dominated by them.

NOTES

- (1) As of June 1992, the gender breakdown for subscription to LINGUIST was 63% men and 37% women (N=2421). Even adjusting for this difference, we find that men still contribute at a rate that significantly exceeds their numerical representation.
- (2) 'Issues' topics discussed during this period include comparative adjectives, the innateness of language, and threats to the field of linguistics from recent academic budget cuts. 'Personal' topics included how individuals first became interested in linguistics, and the death of Zellig Harris.
- (3) In the two discussions analyzed, no contributions were responded to entirely supportively, unless by someone allying themselves with the sender in opposition to another group.

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