MEN'S LANGUAGE ON THE INTERNET

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Introduction

Research on language and gender over the past 20 years has focused predominantly on the linguistic usage of women. In many respects this is valuable, in that it has focused attention on women as speaking 'subjects', and revealed important ways in which women's communicative style differs from idealized male norms. However it has also created an imbalance, in that we have become aware of all the (not always flattering) details of how women actually speak—their hedges, their 'umhm's and 'y'know's, their self-deprecation—while men's language remains largely a normative ideal. Thus as recently as 1990, Robin Lakoff characterized 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" (1990:205). But where are the studies that show men actually speaking in a "direct, clear, and succinct" manner?

In this paper, I argue that when men's language is examined closely, it reveals patterns of usage which bear little resemblance to the ideal of men as direct, efficient communicators. Rather, there is an aggressive/adversarial component to male-male interaction which supercedes the goal of cooperative exchange of information, and often results in violations of directness, clarity and succinctness. Further, this usage, which includes self-promotion, belittling of others, and disproportionately long conversational turns, tends to have a chilling effect on participation by less aggressive individuals, such that a small minority of aggressive males effectively dominates in group discussions.

The LINGUIST data

I illustrate these claims with evidence from computer-mediated communication. The widespread use of computer networks for human-human communication has created ideal opportunities for the study of language and gender. The classic "observer's paradox" (cf. Labov 1972) is obviated by the fact that the researcher can subscribe to a public-access discussion group, and remain effectively invisible simply by not participating in the discussion. Interaction is managed textually, without recourse to prosodic or paralinguistic cues, thus providing a manageable yet authentic object of study. Best of all, rich and plentiful data come already pre-transcribed, having been entered into a computer by the subjects themselves; the researcher has only to save and download messages for later study.

Because of the lack of physical cues as to a message poster's identity, computer-mediated communication was originally theorized to be gender (class, race, etc.) neutral (Graddol & Swann 1989). However, subsequent research has found that gender differences are recreated textually and even exaggerated in the electronic medium (Hall forthcoming; Herring 1993a inter alia). Thus computer-mediated interactions are fertile grounds for the study of how gender is indexed through language use.

In this paper, I focus on interactions in an academically-oriented discussion group on the Internet, the LINGUIST list. A large and active list based in the United States, LINGUIST is devoted to informal discussion of issues of relevance to professional linguists. Although in principle equally accessible to women and men, LINGUIST discourse is dominated by men. In five samples that I analyzed over a two-year

period, men posted 81% of all messages to the list, and their messages were on the average one-and-a-half times as long as messages posted by women.[1] In only one sample did women participate as much as men, and that discussion was cut off prematurely by male protests (Herring, Johnson & DiBenedetto, 1992, In press). Moreover, when women do post to LINGUIST, it is most often to ask questions, whereas men are more likely to take an authoritative role in responding to questions and disagreeing with others' responses (Herring 1993c). As a consequence, discussion on LINGUIST can be conceptualized as predominantly talk among men (Herring 1993b; cf. Kramarae & Taylor 1993).

These observations raise several questions. First, how do men on LINGUIST interact? Second, why do women on LINGUIST participate so little? Is there a relationship between the two? I propose that such a relationship exists, in the form of gender-specific responses to verbal intimidation.

Male discursive patterns on LINGUIST

In this section, I identify behaviors that are typical of male participants as opposed to female participants on LINGUIST. These are discussed under the headings self-promotion, rhetorical coercion, and adversariality vis à vis the intended addressee. Ultimately, I will argue that these behaviors are related in that all have a potentially intimidating effect on other participants. Examples are drawn primarily from two discussions in the sample, the first concerning the use of the label 'cognitive linguistics', and the second the French term 'professeure' (see note 1).

Self-promotion is found in roughly one-fifth of the messages in the two discussions, and with the exception of a single high-status female participant in the 'cognitive linguistics' discussion, all others who manifest this behavior are men. Self-promotion is accomplished by a variety of means including use of one's title or role label, mentioning one's connections to important others, and referencing one's own published work. Examples of use of title or role label are found in 'signature files' appended to the ends of messages, and in message introductions, as in (1).

(1) **As president of the ICLA**, I'd like to take this opportunity to respond to Professor [Psycholinguist's] note.

Examples of mentioning connections and citing oneself are found in (2).

(2) This is, overall, a very good book on speech technology, but this statement and others like it show a very limited knowledge of the range of speech sounds and inventories in the world's languages. (**This bit is lifted from my review, in press, in the Journal of the International Phonetic Association.**) Although I certainly chose extreme examples, **I have a great deal of contact with AI people, psychologists, and others in linguistics related fields**, and although there are some who are very knowledgeable, I am constantly apalled at how little so may people know.

The writer of this example, in the process of providing evaluative commentary on a book, manages also to indicate that he has reviewed the book for a prestigious journal, and that he is well-connected with scholars in other fields. This additional information appears gratuitous

unless we interpret it as an attempt to make the writer appear important, and thereby to lend greater authority to his views.

Rhetorical coercion

Another set of strategies involves rhetorical coercion, or advancing one's own position in a way that cannot easily be resisted or challenged. A common practice on LINGUIST is to base one's arguments on published work that is alluded to only in incomplete pseudo-references. With the exception of the same high-status woman mentioned above, all pseudo-references were produced by men. The following example contains a pseudo-reference in its final sentence (note also the use of self-promotion).

(3)   Perhaps it would be a good thing if the whole matter were taken up in this forum -- preferably in a systematic way, rather than just throwing bibliographies at one another. That is what I tried to do, in small measure, **in my book** [**gives title of book**], which surveys some of the relevant evidence. But there is no lack of **other things to read** in the field.

This writer, after chastising others for "throwing bibliographies at one another", proceeds to support his position in the argument by citing his own work and the vague "no lack of other things to read in the field". Pseudo-references such as these make the writer appear knowledgeable and well-read, yet incur little risk that he will be challenged, in that they cannot be verified by others.

Another way in which men on LINGUIST forestall disagreement is by presupposing their position rather than asserting it. This is accomplished via a variety of backgrounding devices that include *that*-complements embedded by predicates of obviousness (same gender

distribution as above), and rhetorical questions (distributed widely across male messages, but found in only two messages by women). In the former category we find examples such as those in (4).

(4)   **It is obvious** that there are two (and only two) paradigms for the conduct of scientific inquiry into an issue on which there is no consensus.

I need hardly point out that French newspapers all call French Prime Minister Edith Cresson, "Madame LE ministre".

Historically, **of course**, the term [cognitive linguistics] would 'belong' by rights to Chomsky's work and its offshoots...

As Popkin (1992) points out, "of course" and its related expressions are most often used precisely when what is being asserted is *not* obvious to all, e.g. to indicate insider status. This is arguably true for the examples above as well. If the first example in (4) were obvious, the writer wouldn't need to go on, yet until he does we can only guess at what he has in mind. In the second example, many LINGUIST subscribers would not have been aware of the usage in French newspapers had not the writer pointed it out. Finally, the claim in the third example, far from being a matter of course, is highly contentious; a number of participants in the 'cognitive linguistics' discussion had already advanced different views. The effect of this usage is to make it difficult for others to challenge the message content, since in order to do so, they must unpack the presupposition and (perhaps worse yet) admit to not knowing the "obvious", thereby exposing their status as ignorant non-initiates.

Rhetorical questions are another means of presupposing information in a form that is difficult to contradict. Most common are opposite-polarity rhetorical questions which conventionally presuppose a positive

response if negative, and a negative response if positive. The rhetorical impact of such questions is stronger than the corresponding direct assertions; if they were to be treated as true questions, they could only be answered by "Of course it is/is not the case that [X]."

(5)   If, as part of the price, I sometimes have to hear something stupid from a non-linguist, then so be it. **Have we never heard anything stupid from a linguist?**
[=Of course we have often heard stupid things from linguists > Linguists often say stupid things.]

(6)   **Would [Bob Phonologist] argue that generative phonology should never have gotten beyond the stage of arguing with the phonemicists about the phonemic level, as he now seems to argue that those who are not bounded by the autonomy and modularity theses should now, instead of doing their work, spend their whole time trying to play catch-up with the proponents of said theses?**
[=Bob Phonologist would never argue that X, as he now seems to argue that Y (where X—and by implication Y—is a ridiculous proposition) > Bob Phonologist is hypocritical/misguided/wrong to argue that Y.]

Anyone wishing to challenge the assertions that the questions in (5) and (6) are equivalent to must first extract them, and then violate the expected conversational adjacency sequence (in this case, silent agreement) by calling into question the presupposed premise. As in the case of 'obvious' complements, this operation not only requires additional cognitive effort, but poses a potential threat to both participants' face (Brown and Levinson 1987)—the original writer is implicitly accused of misrepresentation, and the challenger risks appearing uncooperative or foolish. Both strategies are examples of what Hoey (1984) calls "the Emperor's new clothes

gambit"—they coerce others into implicit assent by loading the presentation such that disagreement becomes strongly dispreferred.

Adversariality

The third, and the most pervasive, characteristic of male verbal behavior on LINGUIST (and, indeed, on the Internet more generally) is adversariality, according to which the message poster treats his interlocutors as if they were adversaries, by criticizing and ridiculing them, misrepresenting their ideas, and generally attempting to make himself look good by making others look bad. This behavior, in its extreme forms, is called "flaming" in Internet parlance, although a precise boundary between "agonistic debate" (considered desirable) and "flaming" (considered bad) is difficult to draw (Herring, In press a, b; cf. Sutton 1994). However, LINGUIST participants themselves do not view the adversarial exchanges that take place on the list as "flame wars"; the moderators allow the messages to pass, and many subscribers have expressed the view that LINGUIST discourse is remarkably civil. This suggests that the verbal combattiveness characteristic of exchanges on LINGUIST is a normal part of academic discourse in this (male-dominated) field.

Adversariality on LINGUIST takes many forms, some of which have been discussed at length elsewhere (Herring 1992, 1993a, forthcoming). Here I mention two of its most blatant manifestations: sarcasm and put-downs. The most insidious form of adversariality takes the form of sarcasm, in which the writer asserts the opposite of his intended meaning. In the two discussions analyzed, 90% of messages containing sarcasm were posted by males.

(7) As I said before, the real issue is who, if anyONE, is to set the agenda for theoretical linguistics. **I am gratified**, as I said, that **far abler scholars than I** have given **such ringing endorsements** of the pluralism which I advocated, and that **I was utterly wrong in thinking even for a moment that anyone intended to assert the primacy of linguists over non-linguists or of one kind of linguistics over another.**

In this passage the writer insinuates that his addressees are far less able scholars than he; that they do not endorse pluralism at all; that he was absolutely right in taking them to task earlier for asserting the primacy of linguists over non-linguists, and so on. However, because this meaning is communicated indirectly and off record (it is accessible only from the discourse context and the exaggerated language used in the denial, viz. 'far abler', 'such ringing endorsements', 'utterly wrong', etc.), it is difficult to counter. The male propensity for sarcasm is incompatible with the traditional view of men's language as "clear and direct" (cf. also Rundquist 1990).

Finally, LINGUIST subscribers produce blatant put-downs in which they insult the intelligence, character, or ideas of another participant. Although critical and challenging messages are extremely common on LINGUIST (in the 'cognitive linguistics' discussion alone, 68% of all messages criticized other participants), and are produced by both men and women (Herring, forthcoming), blatant put-downs are the exclusive domain of men. Examples of put-downs from the sample are given in (8)-(10).

(8) **I suggest you acquire some expertise on the matter** before making such **sweeping statements.**
     [> You have no expertise on the matter; you are making sweeping statements]

(9)   Oh dear, oh dear, where does one start to **someone who has been asleep for so looooong!**
[> You have been asleep for a long time > You don't know what's going on in the field]

(10)   [Jean Linguiste's] proposals towards a more transparent morphology in French **are exactly what he calls them: a farce. Nobody could ever take them seriously** — unless we want to look as well at pairs such as *pe`re - me`re*, *coq - poule* and **defigure the French language** in the process.
[Jean Linguiste's proposals are a farce; J.L. wants to defigure the French language]

Each of these examples constitutes a bald face-threatening act, even though the first two are linguistically packaged as presuppositions. To the extent that face-threatening interactions are avoided by group members, put-downs and other forms of direct verbal agression act as a deterrent to further discussion, leaving the writer—unless he targets another adversarial male[2]—with the last word.

Taken together, one or more of the behaviors described above is found in 48% of all male messages in the two discussions I examined, as compared with only 18% of female messages (most of which were produced by a single woman; for a discussion of her anomalous posting behavior, see Herring 1992). As such, we may consider them to be features that preferentially characterize "men's language".

Men's language and intimidation

The strategies illustrated above, when taken in combination, create an intimidating effect which discourages less adversarial members of the group from participating. The intimidation effect can be summarized as follows:

1) *Self-promotion* signals that the writer is knowledgeable, well-known, or otherwise statusful; potential respondents are more likely to accept as an authority and less likely to challenge someone they perceive to be of higher status than themselves.

2) *Rhetorical coercion* presents the writer's views in a biased form, e.g. contentious assertions are embedded as facts. Potential respondents must not only make greater cognitive effort to unpack the assertions, but must violate norms of conversational cooperation to respond to those assertions; the practical effect is that few are challenged.

3) *Adversariality* demonstrates the writer's willingness to use aggression and verbal violence to enforce his views. In an attempt to avoid unpleasantness, potential respondents may avoid responding, even if they disagree strongly with what the writer has said.

Two caveats are necessary here. First, a writer need not intend to intimidate others in order to have that effect. This leaves open for the moment the question of why so many men behave in the ways described above, and shifts the focus to the consequences of that behavior. Second, not only women (nor all women) respond by feeling intimidated; rather potential respondents of both sexes are susceptible to intimidation. Thus as reported elsewhere (Herring 1992, 1993a), when surveyed as to why they did not contribute to a particularly contentious debate, 56% of LINGUIST subscribers of both sexes gave "intimidation" as the main reason.[3] Men as well as women commented that they did not want to participate because they "did not want to be attacked the way people were being attacked". Others expressed feelings of insecurity that they weren't knowledgeable or statusful enough in the field to contribute. Still others

were turned off by what they characterized as "cheap shots" and "indirect snideness and smugness" engaged in by prominent members of the field. For some, the sheer length of some messages was off-putting; referring to a 13-screen message, a woman commented, "Who the hell do these people think they are that they can presume my interest for such an extreme length of **turn**."[4] The ultimate effect was that, as one man put it, "ultimately I became weary and a bit disgusted with the whole thing and stopped reading." These observations are consistent with the view that "men's language" behaviors lead to aversion and discourage participation by others.

Still, far fewer women than men participate on LINGUIST. I submit that part of the explanation for this discrepancy is that men and women are socialized to respond differently to intimidation. For men, it is simply a consequence of engaging in vigorous debate, which is itself desirable; many of the same men who mentioned intimidation in their survey responses also commented that they found the discussion "enjoyable". As one man put it, "It was fun. I became a linguist because I like such discussions." Trained since boyhood to compete and "threaten one another's faces" both physically and verbally, men tend overall to be more comfortable with discussions that are agonistic in tone.

Women, in contrast, are trained from early in life to be polite, self-effacing, and to take into consideration the needs of others (Sheldon 1993). Self-promoting and face-threatening behaviors are seen as signs of failure to be a good person, not as moves in a game. Accordingly, women who responded to my survey were more likely than men to express deep aversion to adversarial exchanges and to judge participants negatively as "destructive" or "pompous, aggressive and arrogant". As

one woman commented, "I dislike such people and want to give them WIDE berth." Thus the same response—intimidation—has different practical consequences depending on the gender of the responder.

Conclusion

A consequence of the above analysis is that the same gender socialization that explains men's reactions to intimidation can be evoked to shed light on the nature of "men's language" as well. Verbal self-promotion is a form of display behavior that is socially authorized to a much greater degree for men than for women, as is the tendency for men to talk more in public settings (Holmes 1992). Assertiveness is also a conventionally male attribute, as reflected linguistically in the use of strengtheners such as 'of course'; women tend to express themselves in less absolute terms (Holmes 1990; Popkin 1992). Finally, verbal aggression is common among (especially, adolescent) males, and even enjoys a form of covert prestige (Labov 1972), much as "flaming" is covertly prestigious among men on on the Internet (Herring, In press b). It is no coincidence that these same behaviors and values are also present in academic discourse, which until recently has been almost an exclusively male domain. In both settings, they constitute conventional, gender-appropriate modes of discursive interaction.

What this means is that wielders of "men's language", rather than intending to intimidate, may to a large extent simply be behaving in ways appropriate to their social identity as academic males. Nevertheless, the fact that gender socialization leads women to respond with greater aversion than men to such language constitutes an important social inequity that deserves to be acknowledged.

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Notes

[1] These averages probably underrepresent men's participation somewhat, as in selecting the five samples for analysis, attempts were made to include discussions that were popular with women, so as to be able to compare men's and women's messages. The discussions were: "cognitive linguistics" (Feb. - March 1991); "professeure" (Sept. - Oct. 1991); "dog" (July, Oct. 1992); "rude negators" (April 1993); and all postings to the list during a random two-week period (May 30 - June 12, 1992). Participation during each period is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participation on LINGUIST

		participants	messages	words	avg. wds/msg
5/30 - 6/12	Men	80%	82%	91%	332
	Women	20%	18%	9%	157
	Both	N=99	N=139	N=41,836	301
"Cog Ling"	Men	84%	74%	85%	391
	Women	16%	26%	15%	197
	Both	N=38	N=74	N=25,258	341
"Prof"	Men	70%	81%	88%	249
	Women	30%	19%	12%	149
	Both	N=27	N=48	N=11,037	230
"Dog"	Men	60%	57%	41%	324
	Women	40%	43%	59%	622
	Both	N=10	N=14	N=6,322	452
"Rude"	Men	91%	92%	93%	175
	Women	9%	8%	7%	153
	Both	N=35	N=39	N=6,747	173
Total	Men	80%	81%	86%	310
	Women	20%	19%	14%	213
	Both	N=209	N=314	N=91,200	290

For details of the methodology employed in analyzing computer-mediated messages, see Herring (1992, 1993a, 1993c, In press a, forthcoming).

[2] The first two put-downs targetted a male student and a female professor, respectively, neither of whom responded adversarially. The third occurred in an exchange between two adversarial male professors.

[3] An additional 17% of respondents gave as the main reason that they were "turned off" by the tone of the discussion.

[4] Long messages not only irritate but can be intimidating as well, as for example when survey respondents commented that they did not feel qualified to contribute to the discussion because they hadn't had time to read all the messages posted previously.

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