**Gender Differences**

**LAKOFF** (1975) argued that **women’s speech lacks authority** because women want to be ‘feminine’ and this means being unassertive. The features of this ‘women’s language’ include **hesitations**, **hedges**, **intensive adverbs** (e.g. ‘so’ as in ‘that’s so good’), **empty adjectives** and **tag questions**.

***Later research suggests that men use tag questions more than women.***

**HOLMES** (1995) argued that **women use HEDGING** to express **interpersonal w**armth and not, as researchers previously thought, because they are linguistically insecure. **Men use hedges to be imprecise or express doubt.**

JOHN **DIXON** AND DON **FOSTER** (1996) argued that **contextual influences were more important than gender in the use of hedging**. For example, whilst in competition people use less hedging than in regular conversation. Both sexes use ‘sort of’ more when talking to men than to women. When talking to women, men used more facilitative ‘you know’ hedges than the women.

More recently, DEBORAH **TANNEN** has compared gender differences in language as more similar to 'cultural' differences ("cultural difference approach"). Comparing conversational goals, she argued that **men have a report style**, aiming to communicate factual information, whereas **women have a rapport style**, more concerned with building and maintaining relationships.

**Accommodation theory**

Communication styles are always a product of context, and as such, gender differences tend to be most pronounced in single-gender groups. One explanation for this, is that people **accommodate** their language towards the style of the person they are interacting with. Thus, in a mixed-gender group, gender differences tend to be less pronounced. A similarly important observation is that this accommodation is usually towards the language style, not the gender of the person (Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001). That is, a polite and empathic male will tend to be accommodated to on the basis of their being polite and empathic, rather than their being male.

**Minimal responses**

One of the ways in which the communicative competence of men and **women** differ is in their use of minimal responses, i.e., **backchanneling such as ‘mhm’ and ‘yeah’**, which is behaviour associated with **collaborative** language use (**Carli**, 1990). **Men**, on the other hand, generally use them less frequently and where they do, it is usually to **show agreement**, as Zimmerman and West’s (1977) study of turn-taking in conversation indicates.

**Questions**

Men and women differ in their use of questions in conversations. **For men, a question is usually a genuine request for information** whereas with women it can often be a rhetorical means of engaging the other’s conversational contribution or of acquiring attention from others conversationally involved, techniques associated with a **collaborative** approach to language use (Barnes, 1971). Therefore **women use questions more frequently** (Fitzpatrick, et al., 1995; Todd, 1983).

**Turn-taking**

As the work of **DeFrancisco** (1991) shows, **female** linguistic behaviour characteristically encompasses **a desire to take turns in conversation with others**, which is opposed to **men’s tendency towards centering on their own point or remaining silent** when presented with such implicit offers of conversational turn-taking as are provided by [hedges](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hedge_%28linguistics%29) such as "y’ know" and "isn’t it".

**Changing the topic of conversation**

According to **Dorval** (1990), in his study of same-sex friend interaction, **males tend to change subject more frequently than females**. This difference may well be at the root of the conception that women chatter and talk too much, and may still trigger the same thinking in some males. In this way lowered estimation of women may arise. Incidentally, this androcentric attitude towards women as chatterers arguably arose from the idea that any female conversation was too much talking according to the patriarchal consideration of silence as a womanly virtue common to many cultures.

**Self-disclosure**

**Female tendencies toward self-disclosure**, i.e., sharing their problems and experiences with others, often to offer sympathy (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Tannen, 1991:49), contrasts with **male tendencies to non-self disclosure** and professing **advice or offering a solution** when confronted with another’s problems.

**Verbal aggression**

**Men tend to be more verbally aggressive** in conversing (**Labov**, 1972), frequently using threats, profanities, yelling and name-calling. Women, on the whole, deem this to disrupt the flow of conversation and not (Eder’s 1990) as a means of upholding one’s hierarchical status in the conversation. Incidentally, where women swear, it is usually to demonstrate to others what is normal behaviour for them (Eder, 1990).

**Listening and attentiveness**

It appears that women attach more weight than men to the importance of listening in conversation, with its connotations of power to the listener as confidant of the speaker. This attachment of import by women to listening is inferred by **women’s normally lower rate of interruption** — i.e., disrupting the flow of conversation with a topic unrelated to the previous one (Fishman, 1980) — and by their largely **increased use of minimal responses** in relation to men (Zimmerman and West, 1975). **Men, however, interrupt far more frequently with non-related topics, especially in the mixed sex setting** (**Zimmerman and West**,1975) and, far from rendering a female speaker's responses minimal, are apt to **greet her conversational spotlights with silence**, as the work of **DeFrancisco** (1991) demonstrates. All of this suggests that men see conversation as a means by which to draw attention to themselves, either by interruption or by questionably undermining what the woman has to say by non-paralinguistic response.

**Dominance versus subjection**

This, in turn, suggests a dichotomy between a **male desire for conversational dominance** – noted by **Leet-Pellegrini** (1980) with reference to male experts speaking more verbosely than their female counterparts – and a female aspiration to group conversational participation. One corollary of this is, according to Coates (1993: 202), that males are afforded more attention in the context of the classroom and that this can lead to their gaining more attention in scientific and technical subjects, which in turn can lead to their achieving better success in those areas, ultimately leading to their having more power in a technocratic society. However, women have, on average, higher verbal intelligence than men ([Eysenck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Eysenck%22%20%5Co%20%22Hans%20Eysenck), 1966:4).

**Politeness**

Politeness in speech is described (**Brown and Levinson**, 1978) in terms of positive and negative face: respectively, the idea of pandering to the other’s desire to be liked and admired and not to suffer imposition. Both forms, according to Brown’s study of the Tzeltal language (1980), are **used more frequently by women** whether in mixed or single-sex pairs, suggesting for Brown a greater sensitivity in women than have men to the face needs of others. In short, women are to all intents and purposes largely more polite than men. However, negative face politeness can be potentially viewed as weak language because of its associated [hedges](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hedge_%28linguistics%29) and tag questions, a view propounded by O’Barr and Atkins (1980) in their work on courtroom interaction.