# Hedging but no "Feminine" Adjectives:
## A Corpus Analysis of Business-Themed TED Talks

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**Abstract**

"Women's language" has been investigated in various forms since the early 1970s. Using a list of probes compiled from Lakoff (1973) and Holmes (1997), this study investigates the use of typically "feminine" language forms as delineated by Lakoff as they occur in business-themed TED Talks. Two corpora were compiled from transcripts freely available on the TED website: one comprised of speech from women speakers, while the other was composed of speech from talks by men. The corpora were examined for occurrences of each form in a concordance program, and the data from the two corpora were compared. Results support the hypothesis that women do use more tag questions than men. The data does not, however, support Lakoff's assertion that women are more likely than men to use certain adjectives. Larger corpora and a list of probes updated to modern speech patterns could yield different results.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contrasts in speech patterns between men and women have been a popular topic among researchers for several decades. Sparked by Lakoff's seminal work *Language and Women's Place* (1973), a plethora of studies have examined language use among women and men in an array of contexts, finding evidence of gender differences in different situations. Language use is often seen as a reflection of social climate, and is thus an attractive topic for researchers

concerned with social issues, psychology, and linguistics. While there has been much energy committed to investigating these differences for some time, findings from different contexts and from different times do not align. Additionally, the perpetually changing nature of language necessitates continued investigation into how language is used in different contexts, as gendered language use has important consequences for the speakers (Aries, 1996; Palomares, 2012).

This short study aims to determine whether two language forms, namely traditionally "feminine" adjectives and hedges, are used more often by women than by men in the context of TED Talks (TED Conferences, n.d.). While the effects of power, culture, context, and situation have been found to modulate gender speech patterns, TED Talks provide a controlled context in which these factors are largely the same across speakers, lending particularly well to a focus on between-group differences. TED speakers are seen as experts in a particular area, and the goal of the talks is largely the same regardless of gender: to inform and persuade the audience.

## 2. BACKGROUND

In the 1970s, Robin Lakoff's seminal work with gender-based speech differences initiated decades of investigation into discrepancies between men's and women's speech. Citing the women's liberation movement and developing progressive ideals as catalysts for change, Lakoff claimed that discriminatory linguistic practices representative of male domination were becoming apparent in society (Lakoff, 1973). The default masculine "he," she explained, served to make women feel excluded, and the prevalence of special or negative terms for women that do not exist for men are linguistic practices that reflect the unequal status of men and women in society. Language, Lakoff claimed, is a reflection of male domination and the social climate—not the reverse. Inequality in the ways women are spoken of, however, is not the only discrepancy between the two sexes. Noticeable differences in men's and women's speech habits, Lakoff proposed, both reflect and perpetuate the historical position of women as the passive and powerless sex. "Women's language" is characterized by the use of hypercorrect grammar, polite forms, empty particles, tag questions, hedges,

hesitations, and disclaimers, as well as the choice of syntactic patterns used in each situation (Grob, Meyers, & Schuh, 1997; Lakoff, 1973).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of "women's language" studies either supported the position that power and dominance discrepancies were responsible for gendered language differences, or they eschewed this position in favor of the idea that gendered language stems from cultural socialization differences. Endorsed by Tannen, the *dual cultures* approach held that men and women belong to two distinct subcultures segregated along stereotypical, socially-determined lines (Tannen, 1994). In this view, the primary function of women's conversation is held as building social connections while men's conversation is supposedly goal- and task-oriented. Much of the research devoted to the study of these variations centers on hedges, interruptions, disclaimers, and tag questions (Grob et al., 1997). For example, Zimmerman and West (1975) found that in mixed-sex conversations, women were much less likely to interrupt their partner than were men. Not only did men make more disruptions than did women, they were also more successful at interrupting women than they were at interrupting other men (Zimmerman & West, 1975). Carli (1990) observed that women used disclaimers approximately 3.5 times more often than their male counterparts. Researchers from the dual cultures perspective claim that women are more likely to use hedges, tag questions, and disclaimers than men due to socialization into different cultural groups.

From within the "dual cultures" perspective, however, there are discrepancies. Many early studies quantified the occurrences of language forms without examining how or why they occurred (Holmes, 1997). Tag questions were among those forms frequently reported. Neither statements nor direct questions, tags were assumed to indicate hesitancy or insecurity on the part of the speaker (Lakoff, 1973). While several studies have produced results that suggest women use more tags and hedges than men, the purpose of these forms is not agreed upon. Holmes (1986; 1997) argues that hesitancy is one of the least important functions of tags in women's speech; they also can be representative of an attempt to connect with or show support for their partner. Tag questions are also useful during "small talk" as a way to gain a response from another speaker (Lakoff, 1973) or as a politeness strategy (Grob

et al., 1997). Whereas interruptions are traditionally viewed as a demonstration of a speaker's power, Tannen (1994) claims that they can also show support for the speaker interrupted. According to Holmes (1997), what is traditionally referred to as a *hedge* could also be referred to as a *booster*.

In contrast to the power and dominance view and the dual cultures approach, the *gender similarities interpretation* concludes that there are no strong discrepancies between men's and women's speech (Grob et al., 1997). In a meta-analysis of management communication, Wilkins and Andersen find no meaningful sex-based language differences (1991). Similarly, Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1985) found no substantial discrepancies in conversational interruptions between men and women. As Palomares (2009) asserts, gender-based differences in speech are context-dependent and are generally insignificant. Others point out that elements of speech traditionally attributed to gender differences could be more accurately credited to a speaker's relative level of power in a conversation. Contrary to traditional belief, Kennedy and Camden (1981) found that women interrupted more than men during conversation, and Dubois and Crouch (1975) concluded that in an academic setting, men used tag questions while women did not, suggesting that use of such forms may be attributed to something other than gender. Grob and colleagues (1997) note that a group's dynamics and members' past relationships have an important influence on the speech forms that participants use. Importantly, Holmes (1997) notes that what had in the past been termed as "sex differences" in language use is actually differences in the socially-constructed gender of speakers; gender identity and its potential effects on speech is complex and difficult to measure.

The current study examines men's and women's speech in business-themed TED Talks. While researchers have examined gendered speech patterns for several decades, social gender roles and language use are constantly changing. When presenting a TED Talk, all speakers are in a similar position of power with the goal of persuading or inspiring the audience, meaning that differing effects of context, situation, and power are minimal. With this in mind, this paper investigates the use of traditionally "feminine" adjectives as delineated by Lakoff (1973) in addition to common hedges as outlined by Holmes (1997). Although interruptions and disclaimers are also often examined, these forms

are not included in this study under the assumption that they are not likely to occur in the single-speaker context of a TED Talk.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This short study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a difference in number of "feminine" adjectives used in men's and women's speech in business-themed TED Talks?
2. Is there a difference in number of hedges by men and women in business-themed TED Talks?

According to Lakoff's hypothesis, women will use more of both "feminine" adjectives and hedges than men when speaking in the same context. Taking into account Palomares (2009)'s assertion that gender-based speech differences could more likely be attributed to relative status or power level, this study compares men's and women's use of these language features in a context where speakers are similarly powerful. If claims by Lakoff and Holmes are correct, more hedges and "feminine" adjectives will be found in the corpus of women's speech than in the corpus of men's talks as the two groups differ only on gender.

## 4. METHOD

### Subjects/Sources

Two corpora compiled from transcripts of business-themed talks at TED (Technology, Education, Design) Conferences were used in this study. One corpus consisted of talks given by women, while the other was comprised entirely of talks by men. All transcripts were obtained from the TED website (TED Conferences, n.d.) where they are freely available. Although a considerable number of TED presentations are available online, only the most recent English-language talks from the business section of the website were included. The female corpus contained speech from 19 speakers (37,000 total words), and the men's corpus contained transcripts from 20 presenters (38,000 total words). Speakers were from diverse ethnic and sociocultural

backgrounds, but were all considered to be influential in their respective fields, as is a prerequisite for being selected to speak at a TED event. All TED speakers aim to inspire the audience and spread knowledge and ideas about their topic to encourage innovation.

**Materials**

In addition to the two corpora used in this study, a list of probes was compiled to be concordanced. The features of women's speech discussed in Lakoff (1973) were narrowed down to a short list five typically "feminine" adjectives: *adorable, charming, sweet, lovely, divine*. The three common hedges pointed out by Holmes (1997), namely *sort of, you know, I think*, were also included. The text concordance program MonoConc Pro (v. 2.2) (Barlow, 2000) was used to search for each probe in both corpora. Each token was evaluated along with its immediate context.

**Procedure**

Each token of each probe was organized by theme and subject. The number of tokens were compared between corpora. As the context of the adjectives and hedges provides clues as to the speaker's intention in each utterance, each token was examined in the context of its concordance line as well as in the concordance lines immediately preceding and following it in the talk.

**Type of Data**

Data was collected in the form of concordance lines. As the two corpora contain similar numbers of words and speakers, the raw number of tokens of each probe in each corpus was tallied for comparison. Compiled concordance lines were then sorted by probe and examined for qualitative data provided by the surrounding context.

## 5. RESULTS

The data was first analyzed for the "feminine" adjectives *adorable, charming, sweet*, *lovely, and divine*. Concordance lines were examined to determine the

use of each token to confirm whether or not these tokens were each used as adjectives. The corpora were then inspected for instances of the hedges *sort of*, *you know*, and *I think*. Again, the content of concordance lines was analyzed to confirm that each token was indeed an instance of hedging.

The eight probes produced a wide range of token numbers. Tokens that were not used as "empty" adjectives in the manner described by Lakoff (1973) were eliminated. For example, *sweet* occurred three times as a description of a romantic partner (*"sweetheart"*) in the men's corpus (e.g., "he said to his sweetie let us marry"). These were thus not included in the results.

The "feminine" adjectives produced almost no tokens — there were zero occurrences of the "empty" (according to Lakoff) adjectives *adorable*, *charming*, or *sweet* in either corpus. The table below lists the occurrence of tokens of each "feminine" adjective probe in the two corpora.

**Table 1**  Tokens of adjective probes appearing in each corpus

| "Empty" adjective | Women's corpus | Men's corpus |
|---|---|---|
| *adorable; charming; sweet; divine* | 0 | 0 |
| *lovely* | 0 | 1 |

The list of hedges used as probes in this study produced more tokens overall than did the adjective probes. Table 2 (below) lists the total number of occurrences of each probe by corpus in addition to the number of these tokens that were used as hedges.

The women's speech corpus displayed more tokens of each hedge probe than did the men's corpus. While there were more occurrences of the probes *sort of* and *I think* in among the women's group, the men were more likely than women to use each of these probes as a hedge.

Many occurrences of these probes were ambiguous; it is not always easily discernible whether or not the speaker used each probe as a hedge. For instance, there are tokens of the probe *you know* that are clearly not examples of hedges as shown in the example from the women's corpus below:

(54) if you're old enough to have had a mammogram you know what comes next

**Table 2**  Tokens of hedge probes appearing in each corpus

| Probe | Women's corpus | Men's corpus |
|---|---|---|
| *sort of* | | |
| total tokens | 27 | 14 |
| tokens used as a hedge (percentage) | 10 (37%) | 11 (79%) |
| *you know* | | |
| total tokens | 54 | 54 |
| tokens used as a hedge (percentage) | 37 (69%) | 28 (52%) |
| *I think* | | |
| total tokens | 36 | 25 |
| tokens used as a hedge (percentage) | 31 (86%) | 22 (88%) |

There are also examples where it is unclear whether or not the speaker was using the probe as a hedge as represented by this example from the men's corpus:

(18) now you know the idea of a burning platform

In such ambiguous cases it was necessary to read beyond the immediate concordance line to determine whether or not the token was an example of hedging.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Contrary to Lakoff's prediction, there were more instances of the typically "feminine" adjective *lovely* in the men's corpus than the women's corpus, although at just one token, this is a minor difference.  The following is the one occurrence of the probe *lovely* in the men's corpus.

(1) there's a lovely story that I read

The lack of tokens of the five adjective probes in either corpus suggests that these adjectives are either not used in a persuasive presentation context or are infrequently used in modern speech.  As many of the included talks have descriptive content, the absence of tokens for these adjectives might suggest that the latter explanation is stronger.  It is also possible that larger corpora would yield more tokens of these probes, if they are indeed still used, albeit

infrequently. The limited data, however, does not support Lakoff's claim that women use more of the typically "feminine" empty adjectives listed in her 1973 paper.

Overall, the data examined in this study does support the idea that women hedge more often than men. The probes *sort of* and *I think* were present more often overall in the data from women speakers (27 vs. 14 tokens for *sort of*; 36 vs. 25 tokens for *I think*). Where actual hedging is concerned, however, women and men hedged a similar number of times (10 in the women's corpus, 11 in the men's corpus). The following are examples from each corpus of *sort of* used as a hedge:

    Women:

        (9) in a vivid sort of way

        (10) that oil sort of magically disappeared

    Men:

        (4) a great way of sort of wrapping up here

        (12) what we see is sort of amazing

While *sort of* is used as a hedge a similiar number of times in the two groups, the *I think* appears more often among women than men (31 vs. 22 times, respectively). Below are examples of typical use of *I think* as a hedge in the corpora:

    Women:

        (10) Are strategies that I think would serve us all well

    Men:

        (13) you see I think what's happened, perhaps

*You know* occurred of 54 times in both corpora, but when hedging is examined, the women again hedged more frequently than men, (37 vs. 28 instances, respectively). The following are examples of common uses of *you know* in the corpora:

    Women:

        (2) we're interested in like you know an awkward interaction

        (5) really stress-reactive and you know feeling sort of shut down

Men:

(2) it looked like the KFC special spice, you know

(9) you know was there something actually out there

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study would benefit from being repeated with much larger corpora. As new transcripts are being uploaded to the TED website on an ongoing basis, corpora several times larger than those used in this study could easily be compiled. The larger the corpora size, the more accurately the results will reflect trends in men's and women's speech patterns during TED Talks.

An analysis of the overall occurrences of adjectives in this context could provide a wealth of information to those researching men's and women's speech. While the probes used in this study include adjectives cited by Lakoff (1973) as typical of women's language, future research should to adapt this list for modern speech; although the data in this study showed little to no occurrence of the adjectives under investigation, the selection of more modern probes could result in a more accurate picture of any gendered language differences. While the adjectives *adorable*, *charming*, *sweet*, *lovely*, and *darling* may have been commonplace in the early 1970s, the data in this study suggests they are not common in modern speech. Analysis of an initial frequency count of all adjectives could give future researchers ideas of adjectives that would be appropriate to investigate in current language use.

In further examination of this data, it may also be worthwhile to investigate the functions of the hedges used in men's and women's speech. This would require examination of more of the context surrounding each token. As there are an array of goals possible when hedging is used (e.g., facilitating conversation, conveying uncertainty), examining the greater purpose of each token could provide data to support or disprove Holmes' position about the function of hedges in women's speech.

As the language background of each speaker was not given on the TED website, this study does not take into account discrepancies between language use across English varieties. Further examination of gendered speech

patterns by English variety (e.g., British English, American English) or speaker background (i.e., so-called "native" or "non-native") may provide a different picture. Finally, this study only considered speakers divided into two dichotomous categories of "men" and "women." Taking into account the great diversity of gender expression that exists and is becoming increasingly visible in society may provide a more nuanced picture to any gender-based tendencies. Gender salience (Palomares, 2009), the idea that in different contexts one's gender identification may be more or less present in the mind, may also be worth examining in context of TED Talks; in contrast to talking to people one knows, talking to strangers has been found to result in higher gender salience (Leaper & Ayres, 2007) resulting in different language use (Palomares, 2009), and thus it may be high among presenters at TED conferences who typically talk to a large audience of mostly strangers.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of "feminine" adjectives and hedges in men's and women's speech during business-themed TED Talks. No evidence was found to support Lakoff (1973)'s assertion that women are more likely to use certain adjectives than men, although this could be attributed to changes in language use over time. Holmes (1997)'s claim that women do use more hedges than men, however, was supported by the findings of this study. This study would be best replicated with larger corpora, and an expanded list of probes based on modern speech patterns, and a deeper analysis of speaker intent for each token.

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