Tentative Language Is Kind of Complicated, Isn't It?
A Critical Overview

Julie Klinke

ABSTRACT

Some sociolinguists, notably Robin Lakoff, have argued that tentative language is typical of female speakers. However, other studies indicate that gender may not be the only independent variable affecting the use of tentative language. This overview examines the claim that women's speech is inherently less assertive by critically evaluating the methods and findings of four studies of gender-related use of tentative language. The alternative independent variables that are considered are the gender of the addressee, group composition, gender salience, and topic. The dependent variables vary from study to study, but all fall under the label "tentative language," such as hedging and tag questions. It is concluded that while there is some evidence the speaker's gender affects the use of tentative language, the aforementioned variables are likely to have an effect as well. Therefore, this overview supports the theory that considering tentative language typical of women's speech is a simplified interpretation.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; gender; tentative language

Corresponding author: Julie Klinke (julie.hauballe.klinke@post.au.dk)
Department of English, Aarhus University

Tentative Language

Introduction

It is evident that there are physical differences between the sexes. In 1975, sociolinguist Robin Lakoff claimed that this difference is also reflected in the use of unassertive language, sparking years of research into the effect of gender on language use. However, studies have since raised the issue of whether the use of tentative language is merely affected by the speaker's gender or caused by several variables. By providing a critical overview of existing research, this paper argues that the use of tentative language does not merely depend on the speaker's gender, but also on multiple other contextual factors, including the listener's gender and group composition.

Tentative Language as Women's Language

In *Language and Woman's Place*, Lakoff provides an overview of features she considers to be typical of female speech. Some of the main features she mentions are hedges, such as "It is *sort of* warm today," and tag questions, such as "It is warm today, *isn't it?*" According to Lakoff, the use of such features is unassertive and may lead to "linguistic discrimination," since "the way they [women] are taught to use language … tend[s] … to relegate women to certain subservient functions" ([1975] 2004, 39). Using these arguments, she assumes a deficit approach, which sees female speech as deficient because it lacks the assertiveness of men's speech (Coates 2013, 6). However, Lakoff states that her data has "been gathered mainly by introspection" ([1975] 2004, 40). Since casual observation and anecdotes are not scientific evidence, many sociolinguists have since examined the way women use language, and as will be seen, calling unassertive language "women's language" may not reflect reality. A further issue is that the term "women's language" itself presupposes a specific sociolect. Leaper and Robnett point out that this "can inadvertently perpetuate an essentialist view whereby certain speech forms are characterized as inherently female" (2011, 130). Since the purpose of this paper is to examine whether the use of unassertive features is affected by factors in addition to or instead of gender, this paper will follow Leaper and Robnett's example and refer to the use of unassertive features as tentative language to reduce implicit bias.

One must also note that gender is more complex than merely the distinction between man and woman. Rather, one could argue gender should be considered a scale from masculine to feminine, but even this is a simplification since some people, such as individuals identifying as agender, would be impossible to place on such a scale. If language can indeed be considered gender-dependent, ignoring this could lead to simplified results. However, since the articles that will be discussed assume a cisgender worldview, this paper will do the same.

Factors Affecting Tentative Language

Group Composition and Relationship

While many researchers have assumed tentative language to be reflective of only the speaker's gender, not everyone agrees. Fitzpatrick, Mulac, and Dindia argue that tentative language is best seen "as gender-preferential rather than sex-exclusive, because women and men are equally capable of using the styles of the opposite sex and may modify their usage in various interaction contexts" (1995, 20). While they imply that there is indeed such a thing as female speech by claiming that people of both sexes are able to use the registers of the opposite sex, they differ from Lakoff by arguing tentative language is also context-dependent. Their study examines whether men and women "differ in the magnitude of their convergence in gender-preferential style in conversation," assuming that tentative language would be the preferential style of women (25). They also examine the effect of the communicators' relationship. Their independent variables are the speaker's gender, the listener's gender, and the relationship between the interactants.

Fitzpatrick, Mulac, and Dindia list 32 dependent variables that may be gender-preferential, including hedges and tag questions but also affirmations, negations, and intensive adverbs, many of which had been found in previous studies to "differ for female and male communicators" (1995, 22). In the study, these features all contributed to a weighted result. Thus, whether a subject used tentative language was measured by the total amount of all these features, leading to a more complex picture than if only one feature had been examined. Their independent variables were the speaker's gender, the addressee's gender, and their relationship (strangers or spouses). Twenty couples, all from the same church, were recruited for the study. Each subject had to participate in seven discussions lasting ten minutes each. The conversation dyads were split into same-sex, opposite-sex, and spousal, allowing the researchers to test for the three independent variables.

The researchers found differences between men's and women's speech. Of the 32 variables, only "vocalized pause, use of he/she, pausing, and the use of the negative" turned out to be typical of male speakers; the rest were typical of female speakers (Fitzpatrick, Mulac, and Dindia 1995, 29). The difference was strong enough that it was possible to predict the gender of a speaker based on their use of tentative features "in all but one case" (29). This supports Lakoff's theory that women use them more than men. However, it was also shown that this depends on the gender dynamic: in same-sex groups, the differences in language use were more pronounced than in mixed-sex groups. Thus, it appears that the listener's gender affects the speaker's use of tentative markers. Interestingly, it was found that "[f]or all of the dyads, except men speaking to women, over 95% of the variance … is predicted by the relationships between the communicators" (30). This indicates that relationship is an important factor. While both genders adjust their speech depending on the addressee's gender, "men demonstrate a strong actor effect across conversations with women who are strangers" (34). In

other words, women appear to find it easier to accommodate towards men's gender-preferential register, especially when the addressee is a stranger, whereas men are less likely to accommodate towards a female register. Interestingly, it turned out that the more traditionally a man felt towards marriage and family, and the more masculine he identified himself as being, the less likely he was to accommodate towards female style. Tentative language use may then also reflect gender identity and values. However, while "wives … did not adjust gender-preferential style in conversation with their husbands more than in conversations with other men," and "female adjustment was about twice as strong … as male adjustment toward the female style … the strongest adjustment was exhibited by husbands toward their wives" (31). Based on these data, it appears that women adjust their style to fit the addressee's gender, while men adjust depending on their relationship to the addressee. Therefore, while this study partly confirms Lakoff's theory that women are more likely to use tentative language by claiming the existence of a female register, the results indicate that the use is also dependent on the listener's gender and the relationship between the communicators. Thus, based on this study, tentative language may be used for multi-faceted reasons.

Speech Style of Conversation Partner

Hannah and Murachver (2007) suggest that speech responses may not be solely gender-preferential, but also dependent on the communication partner's speech style. Based on conversations of gender neutral topic between the subjects, they examined "seven [facilitative] speech variables of one participant as the dependent measures and the same seven speech variables of the conversants' partner as the independent measures" (282). The dependent variables included minimal responses and tag questions, which overlap with the features of what Lakoff considered typical of tentative language. Their results relate to the purpose of this paper because they found gender to be an important variable.

For the study, they used 48 subjects, 24 females and 24 males, all from New Zealand and mostly demographically comparable. The study employed a round-robin style: the subjects were split into dyads and then had to hold conversations of eight minutes. Each subject participated in four intergroup conversations, that is, conversations between a male and a female participant. The researchers found that "women were significantly more likely to be categorised as facilitative and the men as non-facilititative in the second conversation … but not the first" (Hannah and Murachver 2007, 281). This means that while men and women may be equally facilitative initially towards a stranger, over time both genders will "[revert] to more stereotyped behavior … in mixed sex conversations," thus using more gender-preferential language (281). According to the study, this means women will use more tag questions and back-channeling, while men's mean length of utterance will increase, presumably because their speech is facilitated by women. Thus, it appears that a communicator's response is affected by the speech style of the person to whom they are responding as well as the communicators' gender.

While the study does not directly examine tentative language, the results still bear relevant implications. It indicates that "personal speech styles of individuals" should be considered a contributing factor (Hannah and Murachver 2007, 288). However, it also confirms other studies' findings that women are more likely to use facilitative language (Coates 2013, 92). Since facilitative and tentative language overlap, this supports Lakoff's theory that women are less likely to dominate a conversation. Hannah and Murachver write that this may be because women are brought up to be more concerned with politeness, which is confirmed by other studies (2007, 286). Another independent variable may then be relevant for the appearance of tentative language: politeness. However, this study did not set out to test the intended politeness of the participants and thus does not provide any evidence that politeness is a contributing factor. Without a study targeting the importance of politeness versus gender in particular, it is difficult to determine whether one is a bigger contributor than the other, since gender and politeness due to abovementioned psychological and cultural tendencies may be correlated. Therefore, more research would be needed to examine this.

Gender Salience

Another contributing factor is set forth by Palomares, who argues that gender-preferential language may be the result of gender salience. Palomares states that "if gender is salient, then men and women will assimilate to the ingroup prototype," with prototype being "sets of attributes that establish a means to differentiate social groups" that people conform to when the social identities become salient (2009, 541). However, he states that tentative language does not merely belong to a gender-based prototype, since in a situation in which gender was salient and women's supportiveness was emphasized, "women would increase their use of language consistent with that prototype because the prototype is related to that linguistic variable," but there would not necessarily be a difference in the use of tentative language "because the prototype is irrelevant to that language feature" (541). Thus, he argues against the claim that tentative language is inherently gender-dependent. However, he theorizes that if the topic being discussed was typical of male expertise, not only would gender become salient, women would also be established as ignorant of the topic, leading to a higher use of tentative language if they are speaking to men but not to women. Thus, he assumes that gender and gender-marked topics together will affect the use of tentative language, meaning his independent variables are gender-stereotypical topics and the gender of the speaker and addressee. His dependent variable is the amount of tentative language features (in this case hedges, tag questions, and disclaimers).

To test this, he created a study based on computer-mediated language, in which he had 291 students send emails. They were told it was an experiment meant to study emails and thought they would be initiating a series of emails that other participants would have to respond to. They were given question prompts based on the five topics which they had to respond to. Of these topics, two

were stereotypically masculine, two feminine, and one gender-neutral. Afterwards, the students completing in the email study had to fill out a questionnaire which included questions about what they thought was the purpose of the study. 5.1% of the students had guessed that the study focused on gender, so their answers were removed to assure the respondents' answers were not influenced by this, leaving 276 usable responses (Palomares 2009, 548).

It was confirmed that the topic and the gender of both speaker and addressee were co-variables. With both masculine and feminine topics, little tentative language was used in an intragroup context, but a man would use tentative language if writing to a presumed woman about a feminine topic and vice versa. With a gender-neutral topic, the same amount of tentative language was used regardless of the gender of the speaker and the addressee. Not only does the study support the findings that the gender of the addressee is a factor for tentative language, it appears that expertise must also be taken into consideration. Palomares points out that while Lakoff uses a dominance approach, which assumes gender-based linguistic difference is caused by women's inferior societal position, this "explanation is … limited because men's high status does not manifest in language ipso facto," and that "communicative dominance" is depending on whether "the prototype emphasizes a status differential" (2009, 556). In this study, a gender-based status difference in expertise was emphasized, leading to a difference in language use. This is different from Lakoff's assumption that women would always be powerless compared to men and therefore would always use tentative language, which neglected to take into consideration situations where women might be more knowledgeable than men. Thus, a dominance approach may still be valid, but for different reasons than Lakoff's.

It is important to remember that while Palomares' results are a significant contribution to the study of tentative language, the environment he created was artificial, and the results may therefore not be directly applicable to many real settings. The topics were heavily gendered, people knew they were in an experiment and supposedly communicating with a stranger for a scientific study, and they were in a strange setting, which is likely to have influenced their language. Furthermore, the study assumes that men have no knowledge of the female topics and vice versa. It is possible that a male fashion designer would not have used tentative language when discussing the female topic "fashion." In fact, one could argue that it was the lack of expertise rather than gender salience that affected the subjects' use of tentative language. However, since the use of tentative language decreased for both genders when they were discussing an opposite-gendered topic with someone of their own gender, the most likely interpretation is that gender salience did indeed affect the outcome.

Other Factors

The studies that have been discussed so far have all confirmed Lakoff's theory that women and men use language differently, even if they suggest more contributing factors than merely the speaker's gender. However, not all studies have had the same results (Leaper and Robnett 2011, 129). In order

to provide an overview of different studies on tentative language and its causes, Leaper and Robnett conducted a meta-analysis of 29 studies on men and women's use of tentative language. With 3,502 participants, the meta-analysis provides a comprehensive scope that would not have been possible in the studies mentioned so far. This analysis' "contextual moderators … included gender composition, familiarity, student status, group size, conversational activity, and physical setting" (129). Their dependent variable was the use of tentative language, which they categorized as the features "that Lakoff … highlighted: expression of uncertainty, hedges, tag questions, and intensifiers" (130).

Leaper and Robnett found that "[a] significant average effect size of small magnitude indicated that women were slightly more likely than men to use tentative language" (2011, 134). This confirms Lakoff's claims and thus provides further support for the theory of the speaker's gender an important contributor to the use of tentative language. However, they also state that "it is worth underscoring the great deal of overlap in the two genders' distributions," adding that "[f]or the vast majority of women and men in the same both studies, there was much more overlap than difference in the use of tentative speech" (137). This is a counterargument to the theory that women and men use language so differently that one could rightly use the label "women's language" about tentative language.

Some important findings that relate to the previously mentioned studies are that there "were no significant effects associated with participants' relationship" nor with "gender composition (same- vs. mixed-gender)" (Leaper and Robnett 2011, 135). This differs from Dindia, Mulac, and Fitzpatrick's study, which found that the use of tentative language was dependent on the communicators' relationship and greater in an intragroup than in an intergroup context. However, it is possible this was caused by a difference in the level of familiarity between the communicators. The meta-analysis did not describe the level of familiarity used in the studies, so it is possible that a more general familiarity was used for the studies in the meta-analysis, and that only spousal relations are enough to affect men's use of tentative language. This could have caused the different outcomes. Palomares also found a difference based on gender composition, though in his study, it appeared that tentative language was only prominent in intragroup contexts when the topic being discussed was heavily gendered. The differences may have been affected by methodology, but it is impossible to compare Palomares' to the methodologies used in the studies in the meta-analysis. All that is possible to say is that Palomares' study seems to go against the trend stated in the meta-analysis. Conclusively, the meta-analysis provides only slight evidence that there should be a difference between men's and women's speech, supporting the general trend in the studies discussed.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the different results of these studies. While some of the discussed studies found that the use of tentative language can be partly or accurately predicted by the gender of the speaker, Leaper and Robnett's meta-analysis shows that the gender differences may not be nearly as strong as what has been assumed. The meta-analysis indicates it would be preposterous to claim that tentative language is exclusive of women. Based on the other studies here, it appears

that while tentative language is likely to be the gender-preferential language of women, there may be many other reasons for a speaker to use it, making gender merely one out of many.

Discussion

Further Issues

While the results above showed there may be multiple causes for the use of tentative language, there are some further issues that are applicable to this paper, the mentioned studies, and the study of gender-related language differences in general.

Firstly, in regards to this paper, it must be noted that while the meta-analysis attempts to present the findings of multiple studies, the studies discussed are not representative. For that, one would need to discuss more, and more diverse, studies to properly represent different findings. Instead, this paper should be considered an excerpt of current research into the topic and an attempt to shed light on how multi-faceted the contributors to the use of tentative language may be.

Secondly, only Palomares' and Leaper and Robnett's studies had a large subject pool. Hannah and Murachver had 48 participants, while Dindia, Mulack, and Fitzpatrick had 40. Their speakers were from the same geographical area and demographically comparable. Therefore, the tendencies they found may not be as generally applicable as the results of Palomares and Leaper and Robnett. Still, the studies with a more limited amount of participants do pose a valuable contribution to the research of tentative language, even if they may be more locally applicable.

Thirdly, it is highly difficult to tease the different variables apart since many are correlated. For instance, women may be more likely to use tentative language, but it is possible this does not have anything to do with their gender, but rather with social status. Coates writes that "until relatively recently, men were automatically seen as the heart of society, with women being peripheral or even invisible" (2013, 5). What she is referring to is the patriarchy, and if one assumes society is still marked by the relatively recent time when women were inferior to men, tentative language may reflect a status imbalance. Lakoff, too, argues that the reason for women's use of tentative language is that "the social discrepancy in the positions of men and women in our society is reflected in linguistic disparities" ([1975] 2004, 72). Whether this is a contributing factor would not be possible to establish from the studies discussed above, since gender and power could be correlated if patriarchal tendencies still exist. Thus, it would be almost impossible to figure out whether the reason for the use of tentative language is gender identity or power unless one managed to make a study that was constructed in a way that separated the effect of gender and social status.

Future Research

In the course "English Linguistics 3: English in its Social Context," we discussed how to create such a study. The independent variables would be social status and gender. To avoid confounding the factors further and to ensure the study was comparable to others, one would have to use cisgender, straight people to ensure heteronormativity. The dependent variables would be Lakoff's features of tentative language. To separate the independent variables and their effects, one would need nine different types of conversational dyads: man/man, woman/woman, and man/woman, where each is then repeated with the man being of higher social status than the woman, with them being equal, and with the woman being of higher social status. Since there is reason to suspect topic is important, one would have to ensure it did not become overly gender-marked or specific to one speaker's expertise. The length of the conversation was also shown above to affect the outcome, with longer conversations leading to larger effect sizes, so one would have to take that into consideration as well. Ideally the participants should be demographically comparable. This way, one could isolate whether gender or social status had the greatest effect. However, one would need a lot of participants to ensure the results were representative, at least of the local area, so it would be quite resource-consuming. One would also have to find a way of making the participants aware of the other's social status in a way that felt natural to make the study applicable to real life situations.

As is, though, it seems there is some limited evidence that the speaker's gender may affect his or her use of tentative language. However, this may not be the only factor. The studies mentioned above have shown that the length of the conversation, the familiarity of the speakers, the gender of the addressee, and possibly even the topic may have affect the use of tentative language. Lakoff's claims thus remain contested. One could argue that her text was originally published in the 1970s, and the English-speaking western world has become more equal since then, so if gender and social status is conflated, one would expect women to use tentative language less now than then. However, in their meta-analysis, Leaper and Robnett found that "contrary to expectations, this moderator variable [the year a study was published] was not significant," and they add that this could be explained if "tentative language … reflect[s] interpersonal sensitivity more than lack of assertiveness," in which case increasing gender equality would not necessarily affect the use of tentative features (2011, 137). Whatever the reason, one should be careful in believing that "women's language" is deficit or inferior.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that while women are slightly more likely than men to use tentative language, multiple factors affect whether a speaker will use it, including the familiarity of speaker and addressee, the length of the conversation, the gender of the addressee, the topic, and the respondent's speech style. This discredits the existence of a "woman's language." There are several reasons why

this is important: firstly, it opposes the claim that women should be inherently less assertive than men, thereby promoting a more equal linguistic view on the two genders; secondly, it shows that gender is not necessarily more important than context. This has implications for future sociolinguistic studies into tentative language, which will have to consider the context lest they perpetuate a societal myth of differences for which there may be little supporting evidence.

Finally, it must be mentioned that there is still more research to be done on demographic variables. Most studies so far have been heteronormative, which in liberal societies is becoming increasingly outdated. Since one study indicated gender identity may affect language use, more research is needed to establish to what extent gender identity influences speech style.

References

Coates, Jennifer. 2013. *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge.

Fitzpatrick, Mary Anne, Anthony Mulac, and Kathryn Dindia. 1995. "Gender-preferential Language Use in Spouse and Stranger Interaction." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 14 (1-2): 18-39. doi:10.1177/0261927X95141002.

Hannah, Anette, and Tamar Murachver. 2007. "Gender Preferential Responses to Speech." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 26 (3): 274-290.

doi:10.1177/0261927X06303457.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. (1975) 2004. *Language and Woman's Place.* Edited by Mary Bucholtz. Revised and expanded edition, with text and commentaries. Reprint, Oxford University Press, Inc.

Leaper, Campbell and Rachael Robnett. 2011. "Women Are More Likely Than Men to Use Tentative Language, Aren't They? A Meta-Analysis Testing for Gender Differences and Moderators." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35 (1): 129-142.

doi:10.1177/0361684310392728.

Palomares, Nicholas. 2009. "Women Are Sort of More Tentative Than Men, Aren't They? How Men and Women Use Tentative Language Differently, Similarly, and Counterstereotypically as a Function of Gender Salience." *Communication Research* 36 (4): 538-560. doi:10.1177/0093650209333034.