Lakoff and Women's Language: A Critical Overview of the Empirical Evidence for Lakoff's Thesis

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Introduction

In 1973, Robin T. Lakoff published *Language and Woman's Place,* a study which has become widely recognized for its assertions about linguistic gender differences and their significance to gender inequality. Lakoff claimed that women employ a distinct style of speech, 'women's language', which comprises linguistic features that demonstrate and reinforce women's inferior position in society. This article creates a critical overview of four studies motivated by Lakoff's work, and investigates whether there is empirical evidence for the claim that women employ tentative language to a larger extent than men. In particular, I will concentrate on tag questions to highlight one tentative feature. I will discuss the methods and findings of each study in relation to Lakoff's claims, and finally I will discuss general gaps and problems identified in the studies. In agreement with contemporary scholars, 'women's language' will be referred to as 'tentative language' in the discussion of the four studies.

Lakoff and women's language

Lakoff's study of gendered language, as presented in *Language and Woman's Place,* focuses particularly on the 'linguistic discrimination' experienced by women in society (1975, 4). Lakoff divides this discrimination into two overall types: 'the way they [women] are taught to use language' and 'the way general language use treats them', both of which function to degrade the woman to a submissive position in society: 'that of sex object, or servant' (4). Thus, Lakoff perceives gendered language as an expression of the unequal roles of men and women in society (4). Through introspection of her own and her acquaintances' speech, Lakoff identifies nine linguistic features that comprise a style of language which she labels 'women's language', as this style dominates the language of most women

(53-56). Examples of these features are hedges, empty adjectives, intensifiers, and tag questions, all of which are problematized as they contribute to the oppression of the 'woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly' (53-57, 7). Furthermore, Lakoff claims that these inequities have great consequences for women's influence in society, as 'women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behavior along with other aspects of their behavior' (7).

An example of a feature of women's language is the use of tag questions, which, according to Lakoff, are employed more by women than by men (57). Lakoff defines tag questions as being 'midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question: it is less assertive than the former, but more confident than the latter' (15). Thus, the function of tags lies somewhere in between declaratives and questions and can be used 'when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim' (15). Lakoff identifies tag-use as 'legitimate' in situations where the speaker is uncertain about something which the addressee is likely to know better (16). She also identifies tag-use in small talk as legitimate, because asking something you already know can be legitimized if it functions to keep the conversation going, as in 'Sure is hot in here, isn't it?' (16). However, there are also cases where the use of tags cannot be legitimized; these are the cases 'in which it is the speaker's opinions, rather than perceptions, for which corroboration is sought', as exemplified by 'The way prices are rising is horrendous, isn't it?' (16). According to Lakoff, the function of such an utterance is to provide an out for the speaker by not speaking too assertively, and 'thereby avoid coming into conflict with the addressee' (16-17). This is problematic, however, because it causes a certain perception of the speaker as 'not being really sure of himself, or looking to the addressee for confirmation' (17). Hence, Lakoff understands tag questions (in contexts were these cannot be legitimized) as devices that mitigate the force of an assertion, which causes the speaker to look insecure.

Holmes and the meanings of tag questions

Holmes is one of the scholars who has nuanced the discussion of tentative language that followed Lakoff's study. Her research focuses on empirical investigation of some of the features comprising Lakoff's women's language, including tag questions. In contrast to Lakoff, Holmes presents a much broader understanding of the functions of tags: 'all tag questions function as devices for eliciting a response from the addressee by virtue of their interrogative form' (1984, 53). Thus, tag questions are not necessarily expressions of insecurity or uncertainty.

From the analysis of a speech corpus consisting of 43,000 words, Holmes identifies tags as expressing primarily one of two overall meanings: modal or affective meaning (53). Tags that carry modal meaning are 'speaker-oriented', as they mark '[the] speaker's degree of certainty about [a] proposition: e.g. requesting reassurance, confirmation, agreement, etc.' (54). Tags that carry affective meaning, on the other hand, are 'addressee-oriented' and can be further subcategorized into either 'facilitative' or 'softening' tags (54). 'Facilitative' tags are expressions of 'solidarity' and aim at 'facilitat[ing] the addressee's participation in the interaction' (54-55), while 'softening' tags 'express[] politeness or speaker's concern for addressee's feelings, e.g. softening force of criticism' (54). Thus, Holmes' observations suggest that Lakoff has been too simplistic in her understanding of tags. Tags may perform various social functions in conversation oriented towards either the speaker or the addressee, and thus they cannot be exclusively understood as an indication of the speaker's lack of assertiveness.

Holmes' corpus analysis supports Lakoff's claim that women use more tag questions than men, although the difference is not very pronounced: 56,6 percent vs. 43,3 percent (1984, 55). Yet, significant gender differences are found when looking at the functional distribution of tags. 61 percent of the modal tags were used by men, while 35 percent were used by women (54). Almost in reverse, 59 percent of the facilitative tags were used by women, whereas 25 percent were used by men (55). Thus, a functional approach reveals that it is a certain type of tags that women employ more than men, not just tags in general. According to Holmes, these findings 'challenge Lakoff's claims that women use more "unjustifiable" or "illegitimate" tag questions "out of fear of seeming too masculine by being assertive and saying things directly"' (56). The findings show that women have a stronger tendency to act to facilitate and maintain conversation through the use of tags, which suggests that 'tag questions can quite validly be perceived not as "hedges" or barriers to conversation but as conversational support structures' (59). Thus, Holmes attributes positive qualities to tag questions, as she sees them as functional facilitative devices rather than manifestations of women repression.

Holmes' method, corpus analysis, has clear advances over Lakoff's introspection and observations, as the corpus contains actual utterances that are bound to a certain context. This prevents analysis from being made in a 'social vacuum' as Holmes states (1984, 50). The importance of context can be illustrated when we scrutinize Lakoff's example of an illegitimate tag: 'the way prices are rising is horrendous, isn't it?' (Lakoff 1975, 16). It is impossible to categorize this utterance without any knowledge of its context. It could either be an expression of the speaker's insecurity (as Lakoff claims),

or it could be a facilitative tag, intending to engage the addressee in conversation. Thus, Holmes' analysis highlights the methodological flaws of Lakoff's study.

Holmes' identification of the social meanings of tag questions broadens our understanding of tags as a linguistic phenomenon, which accordingly deserves a functional categorization rather than an assessment of its legitimate or illegitimate usage. However, I argue that Holmes' category of modal meaning tags needs further subcategorizing, if we should be able to investigate the distribution of tags in relation to Lakoff's claims. According to Holmes, modal meaning tags are 'speaker-oriented', as they are 'requesting reassurance, confirmation, agreement, etc.' (1984, 54). As the category is labelled 'speaker-oriented', it must also comprise the tags that Lakoff deems illegitimate – namely tags that express the speaker's insecurity and ask for validation of his/her opinions. However, Holmes' analysis does not make a functional differentiation between tags that are motivated by the speaker's lack of knowledge and tags that express the speaker's wish for validation of opinion. Therefore, we do not know how the functions of modal tags are distributed in terms of gender, and if women have a higher tendency to seek validation of their opinions through modal tags than men do. Furthermore, Holmes does not acknowledge that Lakoff in fact recognizes tags as facilitative devices when they occur in small talk, 'trying to elicit conversation from the addressee' (Lakoff 1975, 16). Lakoff does not elaborate on this point, but it is important to note that she does not ignore the facilitative functions of tags.

Conversational shitwork

Holmes' findings are consistent with a number of studies emphasising women's tendency to act to maintain conversation. In particular, Holmes' emphasis on women as facilitators is comparable to Fishman's (1978) notions of women's interactional strategies. Fishman's analysis is based on recordings of three male-female couples in their homes, which reveal 'an uneven distribution of work in conversation' (404). Similar to Holmes (1984), Fishman found that the women's language were more facilitating than the men's, which accordingly situates women as '"shitworkers" of routine interaction' (1978, 405). The facilitating nature of women's language is especially salient in the amount of questions asked; in seven hours of recorded material women asked nearly three times as many questions as men did (400). Furthermore, she observes that women are less successful in introducing topics in the conversation than men are (404). Fishman argues (as Lakoff) that these imbalances on the micro-level are a reflection of gender inequality on the societal level (377). However, in contrast to Lakoff she does not attribute her findings to internalized female insecurity. She sees question-asking as a device

containing 'conversational power', which solves women's '*conversational* problem of gaining a response to their utterances' when talking to men (Fishman 1998, 225). Thus, while she acknowledges the conversational benefits of tentative speech, she still sees it as a reflection of societal gender imbalances.

Fishman's tendency to generalize her findings to all men and women is problematic, as her study is based on a very small sample – only three men and three women. Furthermore, all subjects were either feminist or 'sympathetic to the women's movement' (Fishman 1978, 399). As the study is based on assumptions about existing gender inequalities in society, it seems problematic that the sample consists exclusively of subjects who are either actively against this inequality, or who are positive towards the feminists' attempts to diminish such imbalance. Thus, the sample is very narrow and does not represent individuals, who do not hold a somewhat negative attitude towards contemporary gender roles. This makes it difficult to pose generalizations about the facilitating nature of women's language. Despite these methodological problems, Fishman's work is still illustrative of a certain female speech style, which is supported by other studies – for instance, Holmes (1978) as stated above, and Carli (1990) whom I will turn to now.

Tentative language and female influence

Carli (1990) further investigates the idea of tentative language as an interactional strategy or device. Her studies are based on research indicating that women's status is generally lower than men's, and that women are generally attributed with less competence than men (Carli 1990, 941). This position and perception of women brings up certain expectations about female behaviour. For instance, they are 'expected to show relatively little competitiveness or dominance' when talking to men (944). According to Carli, this might cause women to use more tentative language when they talk to men, because it signals that the speaker is not trying to heighten her status (949).

Carli supports her claims through two studies. The first study shows that women used more tentative speech (tag questions, hedges, and disclaimers) in mixed-sex dyads than in same-sex dyads, and that they employed more tentative speech than men did in general (946). In addition, no gender difference was found in same-sex dyads (946). Carli argues that this tendency is linked to women's difficulty in exerting influence when talking to men. She states that 'because women may find it difficult to influence men if they behave too assertively, they may instead have to rely on more subtle and less direct strategies to induce influence' – one of these strategies being tentative language (944). This claim was tested by comparing questionnaires from before and after the dyad's conversation, to examine if the subjects' attitudes about the given topic had changed. The results revealed that 'women were more

influential with men when speaking tentatively', while tentative speech did not increase their influence on other women (946). Thus, Carli (1990) supports Lakoff's claims of women's tendency to speak tentatively (in terms of tags, hedges, and disclaimers). However, in consistence with Fishman, she does not interpret this as caused by female insecurity. Instead, Carli emphasizes that speaking tentatively is a beneficial interactional strategy, because it allows women to gain influence with men while living up to gender expectations and norms. Speaking tentatively is not unproblematic, however, as it is 'likely to further reduce perceived competence' of women (947).

The perception of tentative language is investigated in Cali's second study. In this study, subjects heard a persuasive message, delivered by either a male or a female speaker, which was written either with or without tentative features (947). Based on the recordings, subjects were asked to rate the speakers' tentativeness, intelligence, confidence, powerfulness, competence and knowledge (947). Results showed that, in contrast to female subjects, 'male subjects considered the assertive [female] speaker to be less trustworthy…than the tentative [female] speaker', while in general 'women speaking assertively were judged to be more competent and more knowledgeable than those speaking tentatively' (948). Thus, women's increased ability to influence men when speaking tentatively can be explained by the fact that men perceive them as more trustworthy when they employ this speech style. However, this strategy has a considerable disadvantage, as it makes female speakers appear less competent in the eyes of both men and other women.

In accordance with Lakoff, Carli identifies a link between female status and the tendency to speak tentatively as she states that the studies 'indicate that status may be an important determinant of gender differences in language' (1990, 949). On one hand, her findings challenge Lakoff's claim that women's tentative speech will decrease their chance of being taken seriously; Lakoff states that 'surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions, and a speaker unable – for whatever reason – to be forceful in stating his views is much less likely to be taken seriously' (1975, 11). Carli's studies suggest the opposite, as assertive female speakers were *less* likely to influence their male addressees than tentative female speakers. On the other hand, the studies identify a problematic side effect of tentative speech, which supports Lakoff's argument. It can be hypothesized that the decrease in perceived competence following the use of tentative language has a negative effect on women's access to power. Moreover, since 'tentative language may serve the function of communicating that the speaker has no desire to enhance his or her own status' (949), one can speculate about how this affects tentative speakers' status and access to power on the societal level. Consequently, Carli's findings suggest that the consequences and functions of tentative language are

not clear-cut – the relationship between gender, status, and language is much more complex than assumed by Lakoff.

Gender, language and power – unequal encounters

In parallel to Carli (1990), Cameron, McAlinden & O'Leary (1988) further contribute to the discussion of the relationship between tentative language and status/power in their study of tag questions. The study is motivated by the fact that different linguistic fields hold conflicting understandings of the functions of tag questions. In sex-difference research (including Lakoff's study) the tag question is seen as 'a marker of tentative or "powerless" language', while discourse studies see the tag as 'a marker of power and control in talk', because it forces the addressee to 'produce an answer…or to be accountable for its absence' (Cameron et al. 1988, 86). The discourse analysts support their views through the examination of *unequal encounters,* which are 'speech situations where one participant is institutionally invested with rights and obligations to control conversation', as for instance in classrooms, courtrooms, a doctor's surgery, etc. (87). In contrast to the assumptions of sex-difference scholars, studies of unequal encounters show that it is the 'powerful' participant in discourse that asks the most questions, whereas the 'powerless' participant tends to avoid questions (87). Consequently, tags are not seen as tentative, but as a part of an assertive strategy, because of their 'conducive' character (87).

Cameron et al. further nuance this discussion, as they analyse the distribution of tags in unequal encounters based on Holme's functional approach. The data of the study consists of nine hours of unscripted talk from three different broadcast settings, as for instance classroom and courtroom settings (1988, 88). Tags in this material were collected and categorized according to Holmes' functional framework and then broken down by the two variables in question – gender and power (89). The results agree with Holmes' findings as men scored higher on modal tags, and women scored higher on affective tags (89). Interestingly, results also showed a significant difference between the tags uttered by 'powerless' and by 'powerful' participants: 'no powerless person of either sex use[d] either facilitative or softening tags in any of the three settings', only 'powerful' speakers used these (89). Yet, when it comes to modal tags 'powerless' speakers scored higher (two to one) (89).

Cameron et al. interpret these results in consistence with the discourse analysts, stating that tags are connected to the role and obligations of 'powerful' speakers, but they add that 'this is only true, it appears, of affective or addressee-oriented tags: the use of modal tags to confirm information does not appear to be a "powerful" move' (90). This is explained by the fact that the given settings made it natural for the 'powerful' participant to criticize or facilitate conversation, while it was natural for the

'powerless' participant to seek assurance (90). Accordingly, these findings challenge the assumptions of sex-difference researchers like Lakoff and Fishman, who understand tags and question-asking as interactional moves of the powerless, reflecting women's subordinate position.

Cameron et al. show that more variables must be taken into account to understand the complexity of tag questions, and that the variable of power and role in discourse are equally important to gender. It is important to note, however, that their findings are restricted to a specific type of context – unequal encounters. Thus, we do not know how the functional distribution of tags might look in contexts where the conversational status of the participant is not as clear-cut – contexts which do not dictate who has the facilitative role in discourse. Yet, their study is significant because it draws attention to the fact that sex-difference researchers, like Lakoff and Fishman, have a tendency to be one-sided in their understanding of linguistic variation. A desire to affirm the assumption that linguistic gender differences can be explained by gender inequalities in society creates a tendency to exclude variables other than gender from research, thus failing to recognize that gender crosscuts with other variables – such as power.

Gaps and problems in research

While all studies discussed in this article take an empirical approach to examine Lakoff's claims about women's language, they still share a general methodological problem: all investigate the differences between the speech of men and women assuming that men and women form homogenous groups. I argue that this is problematic as the groups of men and women comprise enormous internal variation. Factors like ethnicity, age, educational level, socio-economic status, sexuality, etc. vary within the groups and may indeed affect the speech style of the individual. Penelope Eckert (1989) also suggest this as she states that 'gender, like, ethnicity and class and indeed age, is a social construction and may enter into any of a variety of interactions with other social phenomena' (215). Hence, it is difficult to isolate the effect of gender, as it crosscuts with other variables. This makes it problematic that the studies discussed above have not accounted for more social factors. One can speculate about how it would affect a study like Fishman's if her subjects had been non-Western or if they had belonged to a specific socioeconomic group. Would it show the same imbalances in conversation? Future research should thus focus on introducing more social factors to empirical studies of tentative language. This might reveal that previous conclusions have been over-simplistic, and that attempts to generalize findings to all men and women have been potentially somewhat faulty.

Scrutinizing the studies of tentative language reveals yet another general issue – the label of the speech style. When Lakoff introduced the idea of a distinctive speech style employed mostly by women, she labelled this women's language. Since then the speech style has been relabelled a number of times to fit into different linguists' notions of gender differences. To illustrate, Crossby & Nyquist (1977) labelled it 'the female register' to specify that it is not 'used *exclusively* by women but rather that it embodies the female role in our society' (312). Later, gender was entirely removed from the term, when it was relabelled tentative language. This label persists in the field of language and gender today. I argue that although this label is ungendered it is still problematic, because it maintains negative connotations about the speech style (and those who employ it). Assertive and tentative speech form a dichotomy in which tentative language is inferior due to its connotations of uncertainty and insecurity, thus situating it as deficient because of its lack of assertiveness. This becomes salient in the definitions of 'tentative'. OED defines 'tentative' as being 'of the nature of an experiment, trial or attempt', rooted in Latin 'tentare' – 'to try' (*OED*). Cambridge Dictionary is even more specific, defining a tentative 'suggestion or action' as something 'said or done in a careful but uncertain way, because you do not know if you are right' (CD).

Considering these definitions in relation to the results of the studies discussed above, I argue that the label 'tentative' is misleading. All studies identify functions of tentative speech which challenge the notion that it is a marker of uncertainty and insecurity. To exemplify, Holmes (1984) observes how certain types of tags are part of a facilitative strategy oriented towards the addressee rather than the speaker, which is further supported by Cameron et al. (1988), who identify how tags in some contexts are linked to the facilitative role in discourse. In addition, Carli (1990) situates tentative language as an interactional strategy aiming at inducing influence, thus highlighting how tentative language helps the speaker to get her views across. Consequently, I argue that these studies demonstrate a facilitative rather than tentative nature of the speech style, which suggests a need for another relabelling – possibly to 'facilitative language'. This would erase the negative connotations and help to reject the idea that women's language is deficient in contrast to the language of men. Therefore, I suggest that future research focus on further examination of studies of tentative language to assess whether the studies discussed above represent a general tendency and thus if relabelling can be justified.

Conclusion

The four studies discussed in this article present empirical evidence supporting Lakoff's (1975) claim that women use certain speech forms more than men – for instance tag questions as confirmed by

Holmes (1984) and Cameron et al. (1988). However, it is important to note that while Lakoff situates tentative language as a damaging marker of female insecurity and gender inequality, the four studies assessed emphasise the functionality of the speech style. In different ways, each study identifies functions of tentative speech which reveal its facilitative qualities. For instance, Holmes (1984) identifies how tags can act to maintain conversation or to soften criticism, while Carli (1990) observes how tentative language can help women gain influence. Consequently, a more functional approach on the social as well as linguistic level reveals that tentative speech forms can act as beneficial interactional devices, which challenges the idea of a deficient female language.

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