Women Linguistic Features Used by Oprah Winfrey in Same-Sex Communication

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Abstract

This study focused on analyzing women linguistic features used by Oprah Winfrey in same-sex communication in a talk show namely Oprah Winfrey Show. Lakoff proposed a theory which stated that there are ten linguistic features of women's speech. Desriptive qualitative method was used in this study because the data were not numeric data. The data were collected by transcribing one episode of Oprah Winfrey show with J. K. Rowling as its guest. Then, the writers identified each feature in the conversation and analyzed it using Lakoff's theory. The findings showed that there were four women linguistic features used in the same-sex communication including lexical hedges or fillers, rising intonation on declaratives, 'empty' adjectives. Meanwhile, intensifiers and five other women linguistic features were absent. These five absent features were tag question, precise color terms, 'hypercorrect' grammar, 'superpolite' forms, and avoidance of strong swear words. Furthermore, the most frequent emerged feature was lexical hedges or fillers while the least frequent emerged features were rising intonation on declaratives and 'empty' adjective. In addition, the use of lexical hedges or fillers which was most frequently found in Oprah's utterances reflected the speaker's tentativeness in uttering words.

Keywords: language and gender, same-sex communication, talk show, women linguistic features

1. Introduction

Gender differences have been one of the most discussed topic since it has been a common phenomenon found in society. Different gender affects different production of speech. When the participants are different in gender, it is believed that the utterances produced by a woman can be different from the utterances produced by a man. Holmes (2008) suggested that women use more standard speech forms than man because they are more status-conscious than men. Men prefer vernacular forms because they carry macho connotation or masculinity and toughness. It implies that women and men have different linguistic competence and it maybe because they have different goal in doing conversation.

According to Renzetti & Curran (1996), sex, a biological given, which concerns with maleness or femaleness is used as the basis for constructing social category, while gender is a term which concerns with masculinity and feminity. 'Some scholars see the differences between men and women as the reflections of psychological differences' (Gilligan 1982, Boe 1987). What makes men and women different is not only from the physical appearance, but also the psychological condition. Women who tend to be subordinate in society will automatically polite to men. Besides, women also play role as a guardian for children, so the behavior and the utterances being delivered should be more polite. This is done in order to make women have a good image in society.

Based on the differences of the utterances produced by men and women, one of a feminist, Robin Lakoff in *Language and Women's Place* (1975) composed a theory about women language features which describes about the characteristic of women language. She described that women have some common features in uttering their utterances. Those features including lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, 'empty' adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, 'hypercorrect' grammar, 'superpolite' forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. It is believed that women more frequently use those kinds of linguistic features than man, so that those features become the characteristic of women language.

The characteristic of women speech may emerge in a regular conversation in natural setting such as a talk show which is carried by a female host. Although it has been scripted, the host is not fully dependent on the script. The host will improve and use her/his own personal speaking style without changing the topic. The host sometimes uses women linguistic features no matter who the participants are. In this study, the writers take Oprah Winfrey Show to be further analyzed to find women linguistic features through Oprah Winfrey's utterances. The host and the guest in this talk show interact using a variety of the English language. The guest is a female writer and it means that the nature of speech is a same-sex communication. Coates (2004) pointed out that women prefer a collaborative speech style, support other speakers and use language in a way that emphasizes their solidarity with the other person. Besides, they will be more expressive when they are in a same-sex communication. Thus, it will be a good alternative to find out how women use women linguistic feature in their utterances through same-sex conversation

There have been some researches that are similar to this study. One of the researches was done by Savitri (2012). In her thesis, she made a research about women linguistic features proposed by Lakoff in a movie entitle Legally Blonde I. In this movie, she found that most women characters used women linguistic features. There were nine women linguistic features found in the movie, except precise color terms. The finding of the research supported Lakoff's theory of women linguistic feature. Besides, Labotka (2009) also had a research about women linguistic research used by a gay (male) who acts as hostess in a show. She analyzed front and backstage uses of women linguistic features proposed by Lakoff and related it to the idea of power and feminity.

None of the studies above takes a talk show as a source of data of the study. Therefore, this study is conducted with a talk show as its source of data of the study. The aim of this study is to find out women linguistic features in Oprah Winfrey Show and the frequency of the use of women linguistic features. Besides, this study explores Lakoff's theoretical assumption about women linguistic feature whether it is still applicable or not today.

2. Women Linguistic Features

Talking about linguistic feature, Lakoff (1975), in her book entitled *Language and Woman's Place* suggested that men and women have different linguistic behavior which includes the use of some linguistic features, such as the following:

1. Lexical hedges or fillers, e.g. *you know, I think, well, mmm.* Hedging is the way to express lack of confidence while fillers are to signal pause even when someone hasn't finished speaking.
2. Tag question, e.g. *the weather is hot, isn't it?* It is used to state a claim but the speaker has less than full confidence in the truth of the claim.
3. Rising intonation on declaratives, e.g. *That's such a great analogy.* It is a high intonation used by women in declarative form and it is a peculiar sentence intonation pattern among women.
4. 'Empty adjectives, e.g. *wondrous, amazing.* They are adjectives that convey only an emotional reaction rather than specific information (Crawford, 1995).
5. Precise colour terms, e.g. *violet, magenta.* It is used to mention color specifically.
6. Intensifiers, e.g. *so* in '*You are so wonderful*'. It is usually used to strengthen an assertion.
7. 'Hypercorrect' grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard word form.
8. 'Superpolite' forms, e.g. indirect request. Women are linguistically more polite than men so they will use more 'superpolite' forms.
9. Avoidance of strong swear words, e.g. *my goodness*.
10. Emphatic stress, e.g. *It was the GREATEST gift ever.* It is used to emphasize the utterance or strengthen the meaning of an utterance.

3. Methodology

The writers used a descriptive qualitative method in conducting her research. This method was considered to be appropriate to be used in this research because the data analyzed were in the form of a transcription of a talk show. The data of this study were from the transcript of interview in Oprah Winfrey

Show. The samples of the data were taken from its last season episodes, Harry Potter Phenomenon, aired on 1ˢᵗ October 2010 with J.K. Rowling, the author of Harry Potter as guest.

In this study, the writers did some steps to collect and analyze the data. Firstly, the writers determined the episodes of talk show that would be analyzed from a particular month and then the writers watched the chosen episodes from video compact disc. The next step, the writers transcribed the interview between the host of the talk show and the guest star and identified the women linguistic features in the talk show based on Robin Lakoff theory. The writers excluded emphatic stress to be analyzed. After getting the list of the features, the writers tabulated and classified the women linguistic features and counted the frequency of emergence of each feature. Finally, the writers interpreted the findings and made a conclusion.

When analyzing rising intonation, the writers used *Praat* software to obtain the pitch pattern used by Oprah. The use of high pitch can be considered rising intonation. It is done to avoid the subjective interpretation if the analysis was only done by listening to the video recording.

4. Discussion

Lakoff (1975) described ten women linguistic features including lexical hedges or fillers, tag question, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, 'hypercorrect' grammar, 'superpolite' forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. Some of these linguistic features were found in Oprah Winfrey's utterances when she was interviewing her guest in her talk show. Oprah Winfrey Show is considered a talk show where women linguistic features commonly found through its host's utterances because as we know that the host is a woman and women linguistic features are the characteristics of women language. Thus, in this talk show, the writers found a lot of women linguistic features through the host's utterances. This study only focused on the host's utterances to take account and analyze women linguistic features in it.

This episode of talk show with J. K. Rowling as the guest, is an episode which is classified as a same-sex conversation because Oprah Winfrey here, as a woman, have J.K. Rowling as her interviewee. They both are female and they have the same gender and sex, so the nature of conversation that will probably happen is same-sex conversation.

In accordance to Lakoff's theory, it is found that there are several features in this show but some of them are absent in the conversation. You can see the table below to see the example of women linguistic features in the talk show.

No.	Women Linguitic Feature	Frequency of Emergence
1.	Lexical Hedges or Fillers	26 times
2.	Tag Question	0 times
3.	Rising Intonation	1 times
4.	Empty Adjective	1 times
5.	Precise Colour Terms	0 time
6.	Intensifiers	14 times
7.	'Hypercorrect' Grammar	0 times
8.	'Superpolite' Forms	0 times
9.	Avoidance of Strong Swear Words	0 time
	Total	42 times

Table 1. Women Linguistic Features Used by Oprah Winfrey in Same-Sex Communication

The first feature that becomes the most frequently women linguistic features used by Oprah Winfrey is lexical hedges or fillers. This feature occurs 26 times within one episode of Oprah Winfrey Show. Coates (1996) claimed that hedges are used to signal that the speaker is not committed to what she is saying. In other words, hedging is a device to show speaker's hesitation of their utterances. In this talk show, Oprah uses lexical hedges for 26 times. The lexical hedges used in the talk include *you know, I thought, I mean*, etc. Those hedging devices show that Oprah is not really committed with what she is

saying. Sometimes, lexical hedges are used in the beginning of a sentence to overcome difficulties in starting a sentence. Therefore, they will use lexical hedges unintentionally to overcome this kind of problem. The other feature that is usually grouped as one with hedges is filler. She prefers to use meaningless utterances such as *ummmm, oh, yeah,*etc to fill her pause rather than to be silent in her pause. Filler is also used as a device to help the speaker thinking about what they are going to say next. It helps the speaker to fill pauses when they are thinking about the upcoming speech they want to produce. In this show, Oprah uses many lexical hedges or fillers through her utterances. It implies that Oprah has less confidence in speaking and she wants to produce utterance as good as it can. She uses fillers to give her time to think about what to say next so that her utterance is well-arranged. The other reason she uses fillers in her speech is because she is talking spontaneously. It means that there is no systematic script that is used so she has to be very careful in uttering words in order to avoid mistake. Because women are more status-conscious than men, in speaking they will be more careful because they want their speech to be flawless.

The second rank of the women linguistic features used by Oprah Winfrey is intensifiers. In this episode, Oprah uses intensifiers 14 times. She uses intensifiers such as *so, very,* and *more* to strengthen her utterances. When she is speaking to the guest, she wants the guest and the audience consider that her assertion is strong. Intensifiers are also used to attrack the addressee to pay more attention to her opinion. In the example of Oprah's utterances such as '*You know, we've heard* very *little about it and you haven't spoken* very *much about it.'* Through that sentence, Oprah wants to convey and to make sure that she has little information about what they are talking about in order to make the addressee fully sure about the utterances she produced.

The third women linguistic feature is rising intonation on declarative. Oprah uses it only one time through her utterances in the talk show. Lakoff (1975) pointed out women have peculiar intonation pattern. Women use rising intonation not only in a form of yes-no question but also in declarative sentences. In the conversation, Oprah seems to seek for confirmation from the guest. She uses rising intonation in several declarative forms to make the guest confirm about what she says, that her utterances are really true. Although it doesn't appear in the form of question, the speaker actually wants to get feedback or confirmation from the addressee. From the analysis using *Praat* software, it is found that Oprah uses a high pitch in the end of a sentence. She raises the intonation in the end of sentence, such as *I cannot imagine what that was* **like.**➶ And finally the guest answers '*It was huge'*. It indicates that Oprah sometimes being hesitant to what she is saying, so she wants feedback from the interviewee to justify her statement.

The next feature found is empty adjective. Empty adjective is used to depict emotion rather than to deliver specific information (Crawford, 1995). In this show, Oprah uses it one time. She uses empty adjectives such as *great,* to convey solidarity to the addressee. The word such as *great* is used to describe something good but the speaker delivers it in more emotional way. Empty adjectives used by Oprah is also functioned to express admiration to the addressee.

Out of ten women linguistic features proposed by Lakoff, there are five features that are absent in the talk, they are tag question, precise colour terms, 'hypercorrect' grammar, 'superpolite' forms, and avoidance of strong swear words. Oprah does not use those three features in her utterances at all.

Tag question is one of the characteristics of women language. The use of tag question is not merely to ask question but it is more frequently used to state a claim that the speaker has less than full confidence in the truth of the claim (Lakoff, cited in Crawford 1995:24). This feature is not found during the interview because as a woman who has many experience and knowledge, Oprah knows exactly when to ask a question and when to state a claim. Therefore, she does not use tag question which is attached in the end of declarative sentence to seek confirmation.

Precise colour term is absent in this talk. Precise colour term is usually used by women when they are talking much about fashion. However, the episode of this talk show does not discuss about fashion at all, so it is considered the reason why precise color term is absent in the talk.

Another women linguistic feature which is not found is 'hypercorrect' grammar. Lakoff (1975) suggested that 'hypercorrect' grammar is the consistent use of standard verb forms which involves an

avoidance of terms considered vulgar or coarse such as 'ain't', and the use of precise pronunciation such as sounding the final g in 'going' instead of 'goin'. Since the talk show is considered to provide spontaneous speech, Oprah does not use 'hypercorrect' grammar at all. Besides, she also a woman who has high status and she does not need to use hypercorrection to increase her social status.

The other feature that is not found in the dialog is 'superpolite' forms. Women use 'superpolite' forms in order to be polite to someone they are talking to. They usually use it when they are talking to someone who has higher status or someone that they want to respect. In this show, Oprah Winfrey is considered to have higher status than J. K. Rowling because she is a senior celebrity who has been successful in her career and has become a famous presenter. Besides, Oprah is older than J. K. Rowling and it is the other thing to strengthen the reason why 'superpolite' form is absent in this episode.

The last feature that does not emerge in the dialog is avoidance of strong swear words. Oprah is someone who is famous for her intelligence. She is considered to have high education because she is now a chairwoman of Oprah Winfrey Network. Thus, in this talk show Oprah does not use any avoidance of strong swear word and even she does not use strong words because she has to retain her good image in society.

5. Conclusion

Men and women are believed to be different in the way they talk. Holmes (2008) stated that women are more linguistically polite than men. Based on the differences of speech produced by women, Lakoff composed a theory about women linguistic features. Lakoff (1975) in her book proposed that there are ten women linguistic features that characterize women speech. They are lexical hedges or fillers, tag question, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, 'hypercorrect' grammar, 'superpolite' forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress.

This study is conducted to analyze women linguistic feature in same-sex communication happened in Oprah Winfrey Show with J. K. Rowling as the guest. Based on the finding, there are seven features present and three features absent. The features found are hedges or fillers, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, and intensifiers. The feature which has the highest frequency of emergence is lexical hedges or fillers. On the other hand, rising intonation on declarative and 'empty' adjective have the lowest frequency of emergence. Since the talk is not scripted, Oprah uses lexical hedges or fillers unconsciously for several times. It becomes the most frequently used features and reflects Oprah's hesitation or unconfidence or tentativeness in making a statement.

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