

Genderlects in Film: Representations of gender in an American movie screenplay

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Abstract

This paper talks about how gender plays a major role in how men and women communicate with each other. The American film “The War of the Roses” (1989) is examined in terms of the ways in which the male and female characters are represented in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic features. It also examines the communicative approaches and textual features reflected in the characters' speech and non-verbal actions.

Keywords: genderlects, communication styles, discourse analysis, dominance, contemporary American gender roles

要約

本稿では、男性と女性と間のコミュニケーションに大きく関係している「ジェンダーと言語」について論じる。アメリカの映画「ローズ家の戦争」(1989 作) を分析し、映画の役者は男性と女性をどのように象徴しているかを分析する。脚本中の言葉と映画のシーンについて分析し、また、役者の対話にある性別による特徴を論じる。

This paper analyzes the text of a contemporary American screenplay by discussing the ways in which it represents men and women. It focuses upon linguistic representations and considers some non-linguistic features such as visual representations, and how they represent the genders of the characters.

This paper begins by briefly outlining the notion of asymmetrical language, and then focuses on linguistic features such as dominance and difference approach theories, as well as interruption. Textual features of women’s language such as hedging, adding tag questions and politeness markers, as well as employing standard forms of speech are discussed, followed by an analysis of the original English screenplay.

Asymmetrical Discourse

Asymmetrical discourse is a notion first postulated by Thomas (1983) to describe interactions in which one participant has relative authority over the other because of unequal status. Tannen (1990) explains that “...what we regard as naturally male and female is based on asymmetrical alignments” (p. 287).

She claims that while Western society has created masculinity and femininity in our ways of behaving and believing that we are just acting naturally, and that what women and men sense as “natural” quite often differs.

“... gender involves not just features of observable behaviour, but our whole way of regarding ourselves as male and female. This includes ways of behaving as well as relating to others and ourselves.”

Tannen further explains that men and women often hold different interpretations of the same information, reflecting their different preoccupations and that men and women are, “tuned to different frequencies” (p. 288). Montgomery (1986, p. 148) says that gender involves not just features of observable behaviour, but our whole way of regarding ourselves as male and female. This includes ways of behaving as well as relating to others and ourselves. He claims that men and women often grow up in different social worlds, thus the language that they use reinforces their positions in their respective societies. As a consequence of their respective isolation, the communicative styles of men and women differ in significant ways.

Women, for example, tend to see social relationships in terms of intimacy, connection and disclosure, whereas men see them in terms of hierarchy, status and independence. Tannen (1990) argues the same phenomenon:

If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, men speak and hear a language of status and interdependence, then communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different genderlects. (p. 42)

If this is so, it may be worth analyzing some types of communicative approaches and textual features used by men and women in order to understand their complex social relationships and how their distinctive gender identities are reflected in their speech.

Dominance and Difference

In attempting to analyze the role language plays in gender representation, the dominance and difference approaches (Coates, 1993) will be discussed. The **dominance approach**, as Coates refers to it, interprets linguistic differences in women’s and men’s speech in terms of male dominance and female subordination, where women are the oppressed group, and men have power.

Tannen (1990) argues men’s language is a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. By doing so, she contends that men are able to take centre stage. They tend to keep attention directed on them in order to prove their knowledge and skills. Thus, some features of men’s language may

be said to be more imperative, directive, and non-standard than women's.

According to the **difference approach**, a relatively new approach of gender analysis, women and men coexist in different subcultures in which women tend to have submissive roles and men dominant ones. Even further, they have different ways of using language and, according to the *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (1989) as cited in Coates (1993), women have, “a different experience of love, work and family from men.” (p.13)

Interruption

One feature in conversation which is classified as a masculine characteristic by many linguistic researchers is **interruption**. Tannen (1990) explains the reason why men often seem to interrupt women in conversation:

.. men who approach conversation as a contest are likely to expend effort not to support the other's talk but to lead the conversation in another direction, perhaps one in which they can take centre stage by telling a story or joke or displaying knowledge. But in doing so, they expect their conversational partners to mount resistance. Women who yield to these efforts do so not because they are weak or insecure or differential, but because they have little experience in deflecting attempts to grab the conversational wheel. (p.125)

In other words, male conversations are frequently akin to battles, whereas conversations among women tend to be based on a different ethos. According to Zimmerman and West (1975), as cited in Coates (1993):

...interruptions are violations of the turn-taking rules of conversation. The next speaker begins to speak while the current speaker is still speaking, at a point in current speaker's turn, which could not be defined as the last word. Interruptions break the symmetry of the conversational model: the interrupter prevents the speaker from finishing their turn, at the same time gaining a turn for themselves.

If men are more prone to interrupt in conversation, "gaining a turn" for oneself also gains them more of a central role in social conversation, thus raising their rank within their distinctive social circle.

Women's Language

While the language used by men tends to be “powerful”, women's language has been described by many linguists as “powerless” due to its non-assertive and passive textual characteristics. Linguistic features frequently used in women's speech such as hedges, tag questions, empty adjectives, and politeness are seen to reflect women's lack of confidence and weakness within society. For this reason women's speech is described by Coates (1993) as a “tentative language.”

Let us now examine three features of women’s language: hedges, questions, and polite/standard forms.

Hedges

Hedges are a linguistic form that tend to be used more by women than men in speech. The most common forms include *I think, I’m not? sure, I mean, sort of, well, and perhaps*. Lakoff (1975, cited in Coates, 1996) claims that-hedging is a sign of timidity and lack of confidence. Coates maintains that women are consciously aware of using hedges in order to refrain from being overly assertive, as they “are socialized to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn’t nice or ladylike, or even feminine” (p. 116).

Questions

Lakoff (1975) and Coates (1996) both describe how tag questions and rising intonation questions or declaratives are used for functions such as:

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- to express uncertainty
- to act as a facilitative or positive politeness device by providing an addressee with easy entrance into a conversation
- to reflect concern for the addressee’s feelings
- to force feedback from the addressee and keep the conversation moving
- to act as a “boosting device” to provide extra reassurance
- to invite other speakers to participate in conversation
- to check that what is being said is acceptable to the addressee
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Polite and Standard Forms

Holmes (2001) suggests that polite and standard forms are associated with female values and femininity. Girls are taught from very young ages to express cooperation and collaboration when speaking, and maintain good social relationships. Holmes maintains that this may be a reason why women use more standard and polite forms of speech. Whereas men’s language tends to have more imperative forms, swearing, commands, and non-standard speech forms, as they carry macho connotations of masculinity and toughness. We find, however, that women’s language contains more polite phrases, compliments, and empty adjectives (e.g. *adorable, divine, charming, lovely*), features which may be labelled by many societies as “lady-like”.

Analysis of Text

Background

The text under analysis is two episodes from the printed script of the movie *The War of the Roses* by Michael J. Leeson. Originally published as a novel by Warren Adler in 1979 when he turned 54 in 1981, its story inspired a major motion picture in 1989. *The War of the Roses* is a black comedy about an “ideal” upper-class, white, American family,

The main characters of this movie are Oliver Rose (a successful lawyer striving for wealth and status) and his wife Barbara (a dedicated wife and mother trying to make a perfect home for her family).

Throughout the movie, Oliver shows his workaholic tendencies and dominant, sexist attitudes. Barbara, on the other hand, shows an active - yet passive - disposition in the first half of the movie, until deciding it is time for her to evaluate her personal identity. Realizing that her child raising and housekeeping days are over, Barbara explores her independence and finally expresses her unhappiness with her husband. Since Oliver is always preoccupied with his job, Barbara feels alone and isolated. She finally shares her feelings with her spouse and much to Oliver’s shock tells him that she wants a divorce. The couple’s seemingly “perfect” marriage turns into a vicious battle for power, material possessions, which is finally mutually self-destructive.

Visual Representations

A few non-linguistic features should be considered before a linguistic analysis of the printed script of this film, as its visual representations are also important in explaining how gender is interpreted.

The first one may be found in the portrayal of a woman named Elke. Gavin, Elke’s boyfriend, takes her on a date to Oliver’s house for dinner. Gavin introduces her as a “pretty blonde date,” a visual representation with words such as “pretty” and “blonde” which in most cases would represent a female that has blonde-coloured hair. The second visual description of this female character is depicted in section (32) of the printed script:

32) (*Elke takes a bite of the food and smiles seductively across the table to Gavin. Through the glass table top, we can see Elke’s foot stretching underneath the table, nuzzling into Gavin’s crotch. Gavin reacts. Barbara notices Gavin’s reaction.*)

It is noteworthy how terms pertaining to “seduction” are often used to describe a women’s sexual activities. In this context, the choice of the word, “seductively” depicts Elke’s social stereotypical role of being a fair-haired seductress.

Another non-linguistic feature can be found in the way Josh and Carolyn, the son and daughter of Oliver and Barbara, described in this scene:

- 81) (...Carolyn, wearing an ice-skating outfit holds a pair of ice-skates over her shoulder.)
- 82) (...Josh, wearing a soccer uniform, gets out of the Volvo.)

These children are formulaically stereotyped by gender: “soccer player” represents a boy and “ice-skater” represents a girl. As these sports are now played by both men and women in many countries around the world, the movie can be criticized for containing sexist ideas.

Linguistic Representations

The gender-based vocabulary found in this screenplay should be mentioned. Oliver exemplifies this when saying goodnight to his daughter and son:

- 24) OLIVER: (to Carolyn, with a kissing sound) Good night, sweetheart.
- 26) OLIVER: (to Josh) Good night, buddy.

The use of these gender-based words clearly represents the gender differentiation in contemporary North America. Labels such as “sweetheart” are used more so for females than males. Terms such as “buddy” are reserved exclusively for males.

It is particularly illuminating to view this text in terms of the **dominance approach**. For example, one of Oliver’s bosses named Mr. Dell uses the follow expression to praise Oliver for doing a good job on a case:

- 9) MR. DELL: Hell of litigation.

This expression was used to compliment a junior in a direct, short sentence, without expressive detail. The use of the swear word “hell” in this expression exemplifies the dominance approach, by showing how men talk to men. Mr. Dell may have felt it appropriate to express his masculinity and to make his power known to his subordinates.

Another example of this male obsession with dominance can be found by noting how one of Oliver’s bosses named Mr. Marshall expresses his reaction after hearing that the wine glasses are Waterford crystal:

- 52) (Mr. Marshall suddenly slams his palm on the table, startling everyone. Mr. Marshall leans over to Mr. Dell.)
- 53) MR. MARSHALL: Then we are paying our associates too much!
(The guests laugh.)

Mr. Marshall not only shows his hierarchal status by expressing his opinion in such a blunt, forceful manner - at the same time he makes a joke of it. Only a man of his position and status would take that sort such liberty.

One reason why misunderstandings and miscommunication between men and women in speech arise may be because of a conflict of interest based on the power balance in the social community. Some men miss the point of what is being said to them because in order to find this information out, they would have to understand the utterance from the position of a subordinate in relation of power. For example, in Episode 4 when Barbara is telling Oliver of how she sold pâté to her friend:

125) **BARBARA:** So I asked her if she really meant it and she said she did...
so I took a pound over to her and collected thirty-five dollars. I'd
almost forgotten what it felt like to make money.

126) **OLIVER:** You sold liver to our friends?

Barbara was expressing to Oliver about how she felt to receive real money and make her own money again after being out of the workforce and out of touch of society for such a long time. This feeling would be difficult for Oliver to understand and relate to, and as a result, Oliver does not understand the reasons why Barbara is saying this. Oliver merely mentally registered the fact that she just “sold a piece of liver to their friends.” It may be interesting to also point out how Oliver degrades pâté into “liver.” This choice of words by Oliver not only demonstrates the roughness in men’s vocabulary, but may also show Oliver’s insensitivity to his wife’s personal interests. Oliver is not thinking about what the social exchange meant for Barbara, but only how the information relates to him and the effects it might have within his own social circles.

Misunderstandings between genders are also prevalent in the scene where Barbara talks about how she traded in the family’s Volvo-brand car for a four-wheel drive truck.

127) **BARBARA:** She paid me in cash, Oliver. Somehow that...felt different from the
money I get cashing a check. It made me feel like...trading in the Volvo for
one of those...four wheel-drive things with the big, knobby tires and the
two-hundred horsepower engine. So I did...I’m gonna pick it up tomorrow.

127) **OLIVER:** Thank you so much for telling me. Uh...and you think that you ...need
this? I mean, a Volvo is a fine car.

Again, we see that Oliver only registers the piece of information about trading in the Volvo – in his mind, a very fine car in terms of status and again is feeling uneasy about the change in the status of car, which reflects his image of himself and his status. He does not ask his wife why traded in the car for another one, nor inquire about her reasons for choosing a more powerful and larger vehicle, or even ask about why she felt different by getting paid cash. Oliver’s concern here is not about the personal reasons

that prompted Barbara to change the vehicle. Instead he questioned why she would change an expensive, brand name car for one of lower status, which might threaten people's perception of their status.

The linguistic feature of interruption is represented by Oliver during a dinner with his bosses and his wife. In an attempt to impress his bosses, Oliver makes Barbara tell a story in front of the guests. Barbara attempts to tell a humorous story, but being nervous and unsure about the sequence of events, she makes mistakes and stumbles several times. Fearing embarrassment in front of his bosses and peers, note how Oliver tries to “save face” by interrupting Barbara:

- 56) **BARBARA:** Well, we were in Paris...
- 57) **OLIVER:** (interrupting) It was our fifth anniversary.
- 58) **BARBARA:** We just had lunch in this wonderful little place in the market district called the Paday Cushon.
- 59) **OLIVER:** *(correcting her pronunciation)* Pied de Cochon.
- 60) **BARBARA:** Thanks. We were wandering around and we came upon the..
- 61)Well, I looked at Oliver and Oliver looked at me, (chuckles) and then...Oh, no. *(Oliver shakes his head wearily.)*
- 62) **BARBARA:** Well, before that there was this big black limousine out on the street. Now, now, this is important. Well, actually, before the limousine..
- 63) **OLIVER:** *(interrupting)* To make a long story short, a wealthy French couple had ordered a special design for their anniversary. By the time it was ready, they were getting a divorce. So the women smashed her half and I convinced the man to sell us his half cheap just to spite her.

Barbara's failure to tell the story correctly in order to impress Oliver's bosses posed a threat to his social image. Therefore, Oliver interrupts Barbara, thus gaining the spotlight in the conversation to show his skill at persuasion and negotiation in being able to convince the man to sell his crystal to him.

The female characters use women's language throughout the film, representing their identities and relations-in their respective social circles. Barbara's usage of hedges, as seen in Table 1, appears to serve the following four functions:

- 1) her lack of confidence in telling a story in front of her husband's bosses, as this example highlights:

69) ...It was so...so...pretty. I mean, I felt....whatever the word. (*chuckles nervously*)

2) her non-assertiveness in telling her husband Oliver her ideas of starting her own catering business, as this exchange illustrates:

119) BARBARA: Excuse me, you working?

120) OLIVER: Yes. Is it important?

121) BARBARA: Yes. Kind of. I hope so.

3) her uneasiness in moving into a very large and beautiful house, as this snippet attests:

106) BARBARA: Well, I just feel kind of strange. I mean,
 this house is so beautiful...and we live here.

4) her concerns about hiring a live-in maid to take care of her most prized and valued possessions, being her home as this pronouncement bears out:

150) BARBARA: The fact is, Susan, I don't need a live-in. This was my husband's suggestion. I mean, I have raised two kids on my own and now they're about to go off to college. They were both accepted at Harvard.

As Table 1 illustrates, Barbara uses hedges such as “well,” “I mean,” and “kind of” several times. This can be seen to exemplify her unsure feelings about events in her life.

Table 1. Hedges Used by the Main Female Protagonist in the 1989 American Motion Picture *The War of the Roses*

Character	Hedge	# of Occurrences
Barbara	well	6
	I mean	4
	kind of	3
	I hope so	1
	maybe	2

Tag questions, rising intonations, and declarative questions are used by many of the female characters in *The War of the Roses* for various functions, as shown in Table 2. Mrs. Marshall, for example, asks questions to facilitate a dinner conversation. Being the wife of a man of power and status, it could be imagined that she accompanies her husband at such social gatherings and is somewhat of an expert at starting social conversations indirectly and tactfully without jeopardizing her husband socially.

Barbara, on the other hand, is new to this “socializing game” and exhibits a lack of confidence in expressing herself.

Politeness markers and standard forms are used more by female speakers than males. The way that Mrs. Marshall compliments Oliver on his crystal exemplifies this:

48) **MRS. MARSHALL:** ...Your crystal is lovely.

Mrs. Marshall uses what is pragmatically known as an “empty adjective” (Lakoff, 1975) to describe the crystal. By making this compliment, the conversation is facilitated.

In the movie when Barbara is talking to Maureen, the daughter of the deceased owner of Barbara’s dream house, both female speakers use polite forms in their speech to each other:

88) **MAUREEN:** Hello.

89) **BARBARA:** Oh, I was just leaving.

89) **MAUREEN:** How kind. Please, won’t you come in?

90) **BARBARA:** All right.

94) **MAUREEN:** I don’t believe we’ve met.

We also see Barbara and Susan, the woman to be hired as the maid, complimenting each other in this conversation:

146) **BARBARA:** Somehow the thought of a stranger living in my house just seems weird, you know? Doesn’t it? I don’t mean just for us, but for you, too. Oh, but then I guess you do this all the time.

147) **SUSAN:** No, no. I try this as a means of finding room and board and a little money. I’m also attending a few classes at William and Mary College. But that won’t interfere with my duties.

148) **BARBARA:** Well, that’s great. I’m happy for you, really.

149) **SUSAN:** So do I get the job?

150) **BARBARA:** The fact is, Susan, I don’t need a live-in. This was my husband’s suggestion. I mean, I have raised two kids on my own and now they’re about to go off to college. They were both accepted at Harvard.

151) **SUSAN:** Hmm, that’s a nice school, too.

This illustrates how the female characters use compliments as a device to make sure they do not threaten each other’s status or role, and attempt to keep good social relationships, regardless of whether or not a given relationship will continue in the future.

Table 2. The Functions of Questions used by Some Female Characters in the 1989 American Motion Picture *The War of the Roses*

Speaker	Question	Functions
Mrs. Marshall	33) Oh my. Whatever flavour is this? No, don't tell me. Let me think now. It isn't apples.	- to invite other speakers to participate in a conversation - to politely facilitate an addressee's entrance into a conversation
	50) It's not Waterford?	- to invite other speakers to participate in a conversation - to politely facilitate an addressee's entrance into a conversation
Barbara	60) ...You know, the kind with the raised flowers that always chip after a couple of weeks, hmm? And they were always yellow, too, remember?	- to ascertain that what is being said is acceptable to the addressee
	106) Well, I feel kind of strange. I mean, this house is so beautiful...and we live here. This is who we are? This is me?	- to express uncertainty
	146) Somehow the thought of a stranger living in my house just seems weird, you know? Doesn't it?	- tag questions used to 1) express uncertainty, 2) reflect concern for the addressee's feelings, and 3) check that what is being said is acceptable to the addressee
	156)...You would be this new element in the house, you see?	- to reflect concern for the addressee's feelings. - to check that what is being said is acceptable to the addressee

Conclusion

The characters Oliver and Barbara are thought to represent typical social roles in one stratum of American society in the 1980s. These characters follow standard gender stereotypes during the first half of the movie, particularly in Episodes 3 and 4. This paper has briefly examined how their gender roles are depicted. The screenwriter, Michael Leeson, may have purposely cast these characters in traditional roles in order

to build up the story towards its climax, which portrays a shocking and ugly battle of the sexes. It may be argued that Barbara's character throughout the movie can be interpreted in terms of Coates' (1993) "difference approach," in which both the feminine and masculine characteristics appear to belong to different subcultures altogether.

“. . . Barbara's character throughout the movie can be interpreted in terms of Coates' (1993) theory of a "difference approach," in which both the feminine and masculine characteristics appear to belong to different subcultures altogether."

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