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"FEMININE SPEECH" IN HOMOGENEOUS GENDER GROUPS*

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ABSTRACT

A characteristic "feminine speech" style has been identified as an ideal type, either using tag questions or rising inflections at the end of declarative sentences or actually stating task contributions as questions. This style has been characterized as part of the feminine role repertoire socialized in American society. Data from seventy three-person open interaction task groups are used to test the idea that this behavior pattern is a role style, with women enacting the behavior more than men. Results indicate that men and women initiate this behavior at a similar rate in the homogeneous gender groups studied, suggesting that this behavior reflects status patterns of the larger society enacted in heterogeneous task settings, but not in homogeneous gender settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1994) describe a feminine interaction style with verbal characteristics distinct from a masculine interaction style. These characteristics include a greater use of verbal tags such as "...don't you think?" or "That is a good idea, isn't it?" Women are also thought to be more likely to employ verbalizations that imply a question, with rising inflection placed on the end of a declarative statement. But how and under what conditions is this set of behavior observed? Is it truly a feminine pattern of behavior, or is it observable in particular situations in both genders? This paper examines interaction in homogeneous task groups to answer the question of whether the behavior is a "feminine style" or is observable for both females and males under different circumstances.

Researchers report a variety of effects of gender in interaction in task groups. These effects, involving both verbal and nonverbal behavior, have been reported in heterogeneous and homogeneous groups. In general, men are reported to be more task-oriented than women (Strodtbeck and Mann, 1956; Nemeth, Endicott, and Wachtler, 1976; Aries, 1976; Borgatta and Stimson, 1963; Craig and Sheriff, 1986; Kelley, Wildman, and Urey, 1982; Lockheed and Hall, 1976; Mabry, 1985; Piliavin and Martin, 1978; Wood and Karten, 1986), and more likely to display high status interaction cues such as chin thrusts and looking while speaking than women (Dovidio, Brown, Heltman, Ellyson, and Keating, 1988; Dovidio, Ellyson, Keating, Heltman, and Brown, 1988; Carli, 1990). Women are more likely to engage in socioemotional behavior, be more concerned with social process (Piliavin and Martin, 1978; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1995), smile more, and display low status cues such as looking while listening and withdrawn posture (Dovidio, et al., 1988; Dovidio, et al., 1988).

EXPLANATIONS

Two explanations have been advanced for the research results reviewed above. One emphasizes the feminine role, with an associated interaction style (Lakoff, 1975; Eagly and Karan, 1991; Maccoby, 1990; Tannen, 1995). This explanation asserts men and women are socialized to play particular gender roles in society, that this socialization creates trans-situational behavior repertoires, and that these repertoires are activated in most interaction situations, regardless of the situation or gender composition of the groups in the situation. These behavior repertoires include verbal behaviors, such as the use of tag questions and the demonstration of a willingness to agree with assertions of others, and nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling, gaze, and posture.

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The other explanation asserts that observed differences in both interpersonal behavior and interaction cues such as verbal style, posture, and gaze are due to the instantiation of status differences from the larger society into the task group. Thus, the relative advantages of males and females in society are reflected in task groups, with females enacting a low status role and males enacting a high status role in situations in heterogeneous groups. In homogeneous groups, males and females should exhibit no differences in behaviors or interaction style. This approach has been developed by Berger and others in expectation states theory (Wagner and Berger, 1995; Ridgeway, 1988; 1991; Ridgeway and Diekema, 1992; Shelly and Munroe, 1994).

According to this explanation, behavioral differences are observed when status differences are activated in task groups. One situation in which such differences are activated occurs when males and females are in heterogeneous task groups. Because of their higher social standing, males exhibit more high-status verbal and nonverbal behaviors than females in heterogeneous groups. Males talk more, exert influence, look more while speaking, and sit forward in their chairs. Similarly, females talk less, accept influence, look while listening, and sit back in their chairs.

In homogeneous groups, there should be no difference in verbal or nonverbal behavior due to the gender of the participants in the groups. Males and females should talk the same amount, be equally likely to exercise influence or be influenced, look while speaking, or look while listening. Other status organizing structures may produce these effects, but gender should not lead to behavioral differences in homogeneous groups.

According to expectation states theory, the distinct interaction style associated with females in heterogeneous groups is a status effect, due to a lower standing of women in society and not a socialized pattern of role behavior. But, if gender is not activated in task groups, then males and females should employ verbal acts at the same rate in homogeneous task groups.

Hypothesis: In task groups, males and females should employ verbal tags, such as questions at the end of declaratives and rising tone of voice at the end of declaratives, at different rates. That is, males should employ this behavior less than females.

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METHOD

The data used to test the hypothesis consist of observations of interaction in seventy gender-homogeneous, three-person task groups (thirty-four male groups, thirty-six female groups). The groups were composed of undergraduate students at a state university who met to solve the NASA "Lost on the Moon Exercise" (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). The groups were distributed equally across seven conditions designed to test how different imposed social structures affect interaction. The conditions included a control condition in which no manipulation was carried out, a condition in which liking for others was manipulated, a condition in which an authority position was created, a condition in which skills of participants were varied, a condition in which the authority position was occupied by a highly skilled person, a condition in which the authority position was occupied by a well liked person, and a condition in which the skilled person was well liked. A more detailed discussion of the techniques employed in the experiment appears in Shelly and Munroe (1994).

The independent variables are the sex of the group members, the condition of the experiment as an organizing structure, and the position of the actor (advantage with respect to others in the group).

Measures of interaction were coded from video tapes of each group. Discussion lasted from ten to twenty minutes per group. All discussions concluded when consensus had been reached about the best solution to the problem. The coding identified statements with the following properties as verbal tags (TAG): (1) a declarative content, but ending with a tag question (e.g., "I think we should put the rope next, don't you?"); (2) statements that are declarative in content, but ending with a rising inflection (e.g., "I think the gun goes next (rise in tone of voice)."); (3) a response to a question that contains a suggestion for a task solution, but phrased as a question (e.g., (Q) "What should we

put next?" (A) "What about the rope?"); and (4) a directly stated question that offers a solution to a task problem (e.g., "Should we put the rope next?").

Two individuals coded independently of one another. The reliability analysis compared the constituent parts of the coding to one another and the total tagged activity, arriving at a Cronbach's alpha of .775. This is a moderate reliability compared to other studies of face-to-face interaction that report values above .90.

RESULTS

The individual measures of tagged interaction were summed to arrive at a total number of tags per actor (TAG). This ranged from zero to fifteen acts, with a mean of 3.64 and a median of 3.0.

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Two other measures may be created from this measure and its place in the total interaction in the group. One is the percent of each actor's own initiations that are tagged (PCTTAG), which measures the extent to which a person is consistently deferential to others in a task group. The range for this measure is zero to twenty seven percent, with a mean of 4.66 and a median of 3.74.

The second measure is the percent of total activity in a group accounted for by tagged activity by an individual, which indicates how much an individual might stand out by using tagged speech in interaction (TAGPCTTOT). This variable has a range from zero to thirty one percent, with a mean of 2.29 and median of 1.44.

The simplest test of the hypothesis is to compare means for males and females for tagged speech (TAG). Comparing means for the percent of own speech that is tagged (PCTTAG) provides a test normed on the actor. Comparing means for the percent t of total group speech tagged (TAGPCTTOT) allows a test of the hypothesis normed on the group. The results of these tests are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Means of tagged speech measures by sex.

Sex	TAG	PCTTAG	TAGPCTTOT
Male (N=102)	3.43	4.92	2.73
Female (N=108)	3.84	4.40	1.87
T-test	t=-1.02 p=.308	t=.95 p=.342	t=1.85 p=.066

It is clear that in these homogeneous groups, females do not generate significantly more verbal tags than males. This is true for the frequency with which this behavior is generated (TAG). Females initiate slightly more behavior of this sort, but a goodness of fit interpretation of the t-test would suggest that this behavior is initiated at the same rate for each gender (p=.308).

For both percentage measures, males initiate more activity, though the results are not significantly different for either measure. A goodness of fit interpretations for the percent of a person's activity generated (PCTTAG) would suggest no difference between males and females on this behavioral measure ($p=.342$). Males initiate a higher percentage of total interaction than females as tagged activity (TAGPCTTOT), though this difference is not significant at the usual level.

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If a directional hypothesis is formulated for tagged activity as a percentage of total interaction, with males expected to generate more of this activity than females, the result (males=2.73% versus females=1.87%) is significant at the .05 level. This is a direct reversal of the gender hypothesis I set out to test.

The possibility of interactions between the sex of the group and the imposed structure is examined to determine if females and males behave differently in some situations but not others. An analysis of variance tests this hypothesis. The ANOVA identifies two statistically significant main effects and one significant interaction between gender and condition. One main effect is for position: being in the relative advantaged position versus the disadvantaged position makes it more likely the actor will engage in tagged speech ($X(a)=4.17$ versus $X(d)=3.38$, $F=5.494$; 1 d.f., $p=.02$). There is also a statistically significant effect for condition of the experiment, with tagged behavior more likely in Skill at task and Authority and Skill conditions ($F=7.062$, 6 d.f., $p=.00$). Table 2 presents the results for TAG for such an analysis. Analysis of the PCTTAG and TAGPCTTOT produce similar results.

Table 2. Means of tagged speech (TAG) by sex and imposed structure.

Condition	Total Tags	Male	Female
Control	3.93	3.40 (N=15)	4.47 (N=15)
Formal Authority	2.37	2.33 (N=18)	2.42 (N=12)
Liking	3.13	2.58 (N=12)	3.50 (N=18)
Skill at task	5.30***	2.53 (N=15)	8.07*,** (N=15)
Authority and Liking	2.50	2.00 (N=15)	3.00 (N=15)
Skill and Liking	3.37	3.73 (N=15)	3.00 (N=15)

Authority	4.90***	8.50*,**	2.50
and Skill		(N=12)	(N=18)

* Significantly different from the opposite sex actor in this condition. This comparison is by Tukey test for significant differences.

** Significantly different from the other conditions in this sex. This comparison is by Tukey test for significant differences.

*** The mean for the Skill condition is significantly different than the means for the Authority, Authority and Liking, and Liking Condition. The mean for the Authority and Skill condition is significantly different from the means for the Authority and Authority and Liking Conditions. This comparison is by Tukey test for differences.

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The introduction of manipulations for structures in these groups does not alter the result that males and females do not differ in the rate at which they initiate tagged speech. But there are two conditions for which this is not true. Females in the Skill condition initiate more tagged speech than either males in this condition or females in other structures. Males in the Authority and Skill condition initiate more tagged speech in this condition than males in other conditions as well.

Controlling for the rate of initiation by examining the percentage of tagged speech does not alter these conclusions for PCTTAG. There is an interaction effect observable in the Authority condition for TAGPCTTOT. Females assigned to the Authority condition initiate more tagged speech than do males as a percentage of their total interaction (.85 percent of total activity for males versus 1.59 percent of total activity for females).

Overall, males and females initiate tagged speech at the same rate in these homogeneous gender task groups. Effects observed in imposed social structures show advantaged actors employ the speech style more than disadvantaged actors. Interactions with gender and imposed structures show complementary results with females engaging in this behavior more in one condition of the experiment and males in another. Differences between males and females are not significant in the other five conditions of the study. Females initiate more tagged behavior as a percentage of total interaction, but in only one condition of the experiment. The task of explaining these results remains.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The question I set out to answer was whether tagged speech can be thought of as a distinct interaction style, characteristic of one gender. The alternative interpretation is that such speech distinguishes one gender from another only when gender is activated as a status characteristic. This alternative suggests males and females in task groups will exhibit such interaction patterns differentially only in heterogeneous groups, and not in homogeneous groups. This is the

overall finding for the seventy groups studied for this report: males and females behave the same in this study.

Males and females initiate tagged speech, the "feminine style," at the same rate in homogeneous groups, no matter how the activity is measured (simple frequency, normed on the actor, or normed on the group). Some interaction effects are observed in various imposed social structures, but these effects are observed in male groups in one structure and in female groups in another structure. There are no differences in rate of initiation of tagged speech in the other five types of groups. Thus the conclusion is that tagged speech is not a "feminine speech" style socialized in gender roles.

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Two explanations for these results are possible. One is that actors seek to "sugarcoat" task activity if legitimation of task action is suspect. This would account for the results cited by Tannen (1994) and others, and is consistent with the results described above. The activity would thus have differential meaning as suggested by Ridgeway and Diekema (1992): high status actors employ the behavior under some conditions, and low status actors employ it under other circumstances.

Another possibility is that tagged behavior is a status cue (Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, and Rosenholtz, 1986). Task cues, verbal and nonverbal acts, provide information about an actor's capacity to perform a task. Tagged behavior communicates such information (Newcombe and Arnkoff, 1979). A well designed experiment in which male and female actors reproduce tagged and untagged speech patterns in attempting to influence subjects would provide a strong test of tagged speech as a status cue. Such a study would advance our understanding of how men and women interact with members of the same sex and members of the opposite sex and the meanings they attach to verbal and nonverbal interaction behavior.

ENDNOTE

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