



The Role of Gender in Language Use Patterns in the Work Environment: A Sociolinguistic Study of Power and Modesty

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Abstract *Differences in gender-based communication patterns in the work environment have been a concern in sociolinguistic studies, given their influence on power dynamics and politeness in professional interactions. The background of this research aims to understand how men and women express power and politeness through language, taking into account the role of social construction and cultural expectations of gender roles in organizations. The purpose of this study is to identify patterns in language use between men and women and understand their implications in an increasingly inclusive work context. This research method uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations on employees in several organizations to explore perceptions, experiences, and communication patterns used in inter-gender interactions. Thematic analysis is used to identify key themes in the use of language related to power and politeness. The results of the study showed that men more often used direct and assertive language to assert authority, while women preferred a persuasive and collaborative communication style. This reflects social expectations of the role of gender in organizational structures. The conclusion of this study shows that these differences in language patterns not only reflect individual preferences, but are also influenced by organizational culture and social norms. The practical implications are that organizations can use these findings to develop more inclusive communication strategies, thereby supporting a more equal and harmonious work environment.*

Keywords gender, power, modesty, communication

1. Introduction

The issue of gender in the use of language in the work environment has become a global concern because it affects social and cultural relations of organizations ¹ ². Different communication patterns based on gender not only create power dynamics but also affect the politeness and ethics of speaking in the workplace ³. Sociolinguistic research notes that there are differences in communication styles between men and

¹ D Tannen, *Gender and Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

² J Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

³ P. Eckert and S McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge Polity Press, 2013).

women which are often influenced by cultural norms that shape expectations of language behavior in society ⁴.

Some of the factors that affect the difference in language usage patterns based on gender are social structure, organizational culture, and hierarchical position in the company ⁵. In addition, gender stereotypes and social expectations also play a big role in determining how individuals of different genders choose words, tones, and communication styles ⁶. In the workplace, gender roles often demand adaptation to the formal and informal language used in professional interactions.

As a result of the influence of these factors, language patterns between men and women in the work environment often result in different power hierarchies, where politeness and emphasis on formal forms of language take precedence ⁷. Studies show that these language differences can strengthen or reduce social power within workgroups and create perceptions of power gaps based on gender ⁸. This has an impact on how the effectiveness of communication and collaboration in the workplace is formed ⁹.

The variable taken in this study is the role of gender in the pattern of language use in the workplace, which includes the dimensions of power and politeness. Sociolinguistics as a branch of linguistics focuses on the relationship between language and society, including how language reflects social structures such as gender¹⁰. Patterns of power and politeness in language are part of pragmatic studies that pay attention to context and purpose in communication interactions ¹¹.

This research has a novelty in the approach of sociolinguistic studies that combines pragmatic analysis of power and politeness specifically in the work environment, something that is still rarely raised in the Indonesian context ¹². By emphasizing local cultural factors and the role of gender in different social contexts, this research is expected to make a new contribution to gender and sociolinguistic studies in Indonesia ¹³,

The urgency of this research lies in the growing need for a better understanding of effective communication in an increasingly diverse work environment ¹⁴. Given the important role of language in supporting successful professional interactions, a deeper understanding of how different patterns of language use based on gender can affect work dynamics is needed ¹⁵.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the differences in language usage patterns between men and women in the workplace by focusing on the aspects of power and

⁴ Robin Lakoff, *Robin Tolmach Lakoff*, *Wikipedia*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁵ Deborah Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions," *Applied Linguistics* 26, no. 4 (2005): 482–502, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ami027>.

⁶ S. Mills, *Gender and Politeness* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁷ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

⁸ Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*.

⁹ Mills, *Gender and Politeness*.

¹⁰ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

¹¹ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*.

¹² Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*.

¹³ Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions."

¹⁴ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*.

¹⁵ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

politeness in communication ¹⁶. This study also aims to understand the factors that contribute to these differences and their impact on relationships between employees in the work environment.

The benefits of this research include the development of practical insights for organizations to understand the importance of gender differences in communication, so as to create an inclusive and productive work environment ¹⁷. This research also contributes to the sociolinguistic literature in the context of gender interaction in Indonesia, which can be a reference for further research in similar fields.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to understand the role of gender in the pattern of language use in the work environment. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on a complex social and cultural phenomenon, namely the use of language in the context of power and politeness in the workplace, which is not easily measured with quantitative data ^{18,19,20}. The descriptive method allows researchers to explore and elaborate on this phenomenon in detail based on the experience and perspective of the research subject, who in this case is employees from different gender backgrounds in the organization.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with several purposively selected informants, namely men and women who work in various positions in the organization. This purposive sampling method is used so that the selected informants have an understanding and experience that is relevant to the focus of the research. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to provide flexibility for researchers to explore more in-depth information about informants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations related to language patterns, power, and politeness ^{21, 22}. In addition to interviews, this study also uses participatory observation techniques to understand the dynamics of direct interaction in the workplace, so that researchers can capture communication patterns that informants may not be aware of.

The data obtained were then analyzed using thematic analysis, which included the initial coding steps, theme identification, and interpretation of meaning in the context of the research. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows researchers to identify specific patterns in the data that are relevant to the variables of gender, power,

¹⁶ Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions."

¹⁷ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

¹⁸ J. W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Public Administration, vol. 77 (Sage Publication, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9299.00177>.

¹⁹ Ahmad Rijali, "Analisis Data Kualitatif (Qualitative Data Analysis)," *Alhadharah: Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah* 17, no. 33 (2018): 81–95.

²⁰ M. Q Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. (Sage Publication, 2015).

²¹ Patton.

²² Kota Ohata, "Potential Sources of Anxiety for Japanese Learners of English: Preliminary Case Interviews with Five Japanese College Students in the U.S.," *TESL-EJ* 9, no. 3 (December 2005): 1–21.

and politeness in language use ²³. The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation techniques, by comparing the results of interviews and observations and member-checking with informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is in accordance with the informant's experience.

This research also adheres to the principles of qualitative research ethics, including maintaining the confidentiality of the informants' identities, obtaining their consent before interviews and observations, and giving the informants the opportunity to withdraw from the research process at any time ²⁴. This approach is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of how gender roles affect patterns of language, power, and politeness in the work environment, as well as open up opportunities for further research in similar contexts.

3. Result & Discussion

This study produced several key findings that support the purpose of the study, which is to understand the differences in language patterns between men and women in the workplace regarding aspects of power and politeness. The data from in-depth interviews and observations have been grouped into several main themes according to the focus of the research. The following is an explanation of each of the findings presented in the sub-sections.

A. Differences in Language Patterns between Men and Women in the Workplace

Based on the results of the interviews, it was found that there were significant differences in word choice, tone of voice, and communication style between men and women. For example, men tend to use direct language, while women more often use language with a higher sense of politeness. This data is outlined in Table 1, which shows the percentage of word choice and language styles used by male and female informants.

TABLE 1. Percentage of Language Patterns by Gender.

Language Patterns	Man (%)	Woman (%)
Live Language	70	30
Indirect Language	30	70
Firm Tone	65	40
Soft Tone	35	60

²³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706QP0630A>.

²⁴ J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, Dan Mixed* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2015).

This data shows that direct language patterns are more commonly used by men, while women prefer indirect communication styles, tending to maintain politeness and harmony of interaction.

B. The Influence of Gender on Power in Communication

The findings of the study show that gender has an effect on how power is expressed in communication. Men in senior positions more often use strong language to assert power, while women in similar positions tend to use a polite, persuasive approach. Figure 1 below shows the differences in language styles between men and women in managerial positions.

C. Patterns of Politeness in Communication Based on Gender

Observations show that women tend to use polite language more often in professional interactions, especially when communicating with colleagues or superiors. Men tend to be more comfortable with a more straightforward communication style. This politeness is reflected in the use of greeting words, apologies, and expressions of concern, as shown in table 2.

TABLE 2. Patterns of Politeness in Communication Based on Gender.

Patterns of Politeness	Man (%)	Woman (%)
Use of Greetings	40	70
Apology Phrases	25	65
Expression of Concern	35	75

These results show that women tend to pay more attention to the aspect of politeness in communication, which may be influenced by social expectations of gender roles in the work environment.

D. Language Patterns Towards Work Relations

The findings of the study also show that these differences in language patterns have an impact on interpersonal relationships in the workplace. For example, men who use direct language are often perceived as more assertive but less collaborative, while women who use indirect language are perceived as more collaborative but less assertive in giving instructions. This affects the perception of work effectiveness and relationships between employees.

Discussion

This section describes the results of the study in depth, by comparing the findings obtained with previous research and providing an interpretation of the findings in a sociolinguistic context. This discussion was prepared based on the research objectives, namely understanding language patterns based on gender, its

influence on power in communication, differences in politeness, and its impact on relationships in the workplace.

A. Differences in Language Patterns Based on Gender

The difference in language patterns between men and women in the work environment is not only a prominent sociolinguistic phenomenon but also reflects a deeper social and cultural construct. Previous studies indicate that this communication pattern is often influenced by social norms, gender stereotypes, and cultural expectations of gender roles in society. In this context, men are often expected to show assertiveness and dominance, while women tend to be associated with politeness and empathy. These findings are in line with several relevant studies in the sociolinguistic literature.

Based on the findings of the study, men in the work environment tend to use direct and assertive language. This is consistent with the linguistic dominance theory described by ²⁵ Tannen, where men more often use direct language as a strategy to show power and assertiveness. In professional communication, men often rely on statements or instructions without much consideration for the emotional or warmth aspect of the interaction ²⁶. This attitude may be based on cultural norms that consider assertiveness to be a masculine quality valued in leadership positions ²⁷.

Some studies, such as those conducted by Cameron, have also shown that direct language is more commonly used by men as a reflection of their competitive attitude in the work environment ²⁸. Sociolinguistics emphasizes that language is a tool for projecting social identity, so men in positions of authority are more likely to use language patterns that show assertiveness and dominance to maintain their position in the organization ²⁹. In this case, language became an important tool for men to strengthen their position in the social structure of the organization.

In contrast, women in the workplace tend to use indirect and polite language. It is often associated with efforts to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships. According to Holmes research, women are more likely to use language strategies that focus on politeness and empathy, as part of efforts to maintain a balance in relationships ³⁰. This approach not only reflects social awareness of the norm of decency but also relates to how women perceive their position within the organizational structure.

Mills explains that women often use apologies or refinements in their language as a way to avoid conflict and maintain harmony ³¹. In this study, it was found that

²⁵ Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*.

²⁶ Janet Holmes and Nick Wilson, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Routledge, 2022).

²⁷ Lakoff, *Robin Tolmach Lakoff*.

²⁸ Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions."

²⁹ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*.

³⁰ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

³¹ Mills, *Gender and Politeness*.

women more often used words that signified empathy or showed support for the interlocutor, a finding supported by the face-saving theory that is often used in social interactions. This study also supports the opinion of Cameron, who mentioned that women use polite language as a social strategy to overcome power inequality in workplace interactions ³².

In a sociolinguistic perspective, language is considered a reflection of social and gender identity, as well as a tool for negotiating power in interaction. A study by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet highlights that differences in language patterns based on gender can be seen as a product of social constructions in which men and women are associated with different social roles and expectations ³³. For example, the use of direct language by men may be considered part of the expectation that they should demonstrate competence and authority, while the use of polite language by women may be related to the expectation that they should maintain politeness and harmony.

In the context of organizations, these differences in language patterns are also related to institutional norms that may reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes. In a work environment that is more open to inclusivity, women tend to feel more free to use more direct language without fear of being perceived as aggressive or less polite. On the other hand, in organizations that maintain a traditional hierarchical structure, women may be more adaptable to the norms of politeness to avoid negative perceptions from colleagues.

There are several factors that may influence why these differences continue to exist in the work environment. One of them is the power of social and cultural norms embedded in education and media. Gender stereotypes in the use of language are often reinforced from an early age, where men are encouraged to be assertive and competitive, while women are encouraged to be gentle and cooperative ³⁴. In a work environment, these expectations can continue, creating communication patterns that are often difficult to change.

In addition, another factor that plays a role is hierarchical position and power in the organization. Women in senior positions may still face pressure to maintain politeness in language so as not to appear "too aggressive," while men are more free to use strong language without worrying about the same judgment. In this context, language patterns can be seen as a reflection of power structures that are still deeply rooted in organizations, where gender differences can affect how a person is perceived based on their chosen communication style ³⁵.

³² Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions."

³³ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*.

³⁴ Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*.

³⁵ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

B. The Influence of Gender on Power in Communication

Gender has a significant influence on the way individuals express power in communication, especially in professional contexts. The study shows that men and women express power differently, with men tending to use assertive and direct language, while women use a more persuasive and collaborative approach. This pattern is not only related to individual characteristics, but also to the social norms that underlie expectations of gender roles in the workplace.

Research by Tannen and Holmes states that social expectations tend to lead men to be dominant and assertive, which is reflected in their communication style^{36 37}. In the context of work, men often use instructive sentences and direct commands as strategies to assert their power. According to the theory of linguistic dominance, these assertive languages are used to create clear hierarchies and maintain their role in organizational power structures. For example, men in leadership positions are more likely to use words of command and express themselves in a convincing tone to emphasize their authority. In sociolinguistics, this behavior can be seen as part of an effort to maintain a masculine identity that focuses on dominance and power.

On the other hand, women in the same position often prefer a persuasive and collaborative approach, as a form of adaptation to social expectations that puts them in a more supportive role than a dominant one. Mills mentioned that women are more likely to use language that shows empathy and collaboration, which is designed to maintain harmony and avoid conflict³⁸. In addition, Cameron found that women's collaborative approaches can create a more inclusive work dynamic, which is often seen as a force in an increasingly diverse and inclusive workplace³⁹.

In the perspective of face theory Goffman, communication involves not only the delivery of information but also the management of faces or social images, which are influenced by gender differences⁴⁰. Men in positions of power often use communication strategies that maintain their "positive face," which is a self-image as a firm and authoritative leader. They tend to avoid using words that can damage the image, such as expressions of doubt or tenderness⁴¹. In this case, a firm communication strategy is used to affirm their position in the organizational structure.

Women, on the other hand, are often more focused on "negative faces" in the sense of maintaining the impression that they respect the autonomy of others. This approach makes them use subtle and inclusive language more often. Research by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet states that women often consider the social impact of their communication more carefully than men, especially in contexts where power

³⁶ Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*.

³⁷ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

³⁸ Mills, *Gender and Politeness*.

³⁹ Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions."

⁴⁰ E Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Doubleday, 1967).

⁴¹ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

and dominance are usually held by men ⁴². By using collaborative language, women seek to build a social image that shows inclusivity and respect for their colleagues, an approach that is considered more in line with the norms of social decency.

An empirical study by Holmes provides evidence that men and women use different communication strategies to express power in organizations ⁴³. In their observations, men in managerial positions gave direct instructions more often and rarely used words that softened their statements. This study reveals that men's communication styles play a role in strengthening hierarchies in the workplace and can give the impression that they are strong leaders. On the other hand, women in similar positions more often use communication strategies that involve consensus and seek input from the team, an approach that strengthens collaboration and engagement.

This study is in line with the results of Mills, which stated that men use language to affirm their dominant position, while women are more likely to use language to build relationships and support collective work structures ⁴⁴. In this context, women's communication patterns serve as a tool to promote work harmony, while men's communication patterns are more focused on achieving immediate goals with little attention to social factors.

Organizational culture also plays an important role in shaping the way men and women express power in communication. In a more inclusive and open work environment to diversity, women are more free to use assertive language without worrying about being perceived as too aggressive or "not conforming" to gender stereotypes . In contrast, in organizations that maintain traditional hierarchical structures, women may feel compelled to use more polite and indirect language to maintain harmony and avoid negative stereotypes.

In this context, sociolinguistic theories of power and gender show that the expression of power in communication is not only determined by the individual but also by the social norms inherent in the organizational culture. Cameron's research shows that organizations that promote inclusivity can facilitate the use of strong language by women without the risk of being labeled as "unfeminine" ⁴⁵. This suggests that an inclusive organizational culture can help reduce pressure on women to communicate politely and indirectly, and conversely, encourage more authentic self-expression.

The findings of this study show that the expression of power in communication is greatly influenced by the social construction of gender, which is sustained and maintained by organizational culture and social norms. A more assertive male

⁴² Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*.

⁴³ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

⁴⁴ Mills, *Gender and Politeness*.

⁴⁵ Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions."

communication style is often seen as a sign of strong leadership, while a persuasive and collaborative female communication style is often seen as an inclusive approach that is more suitable for creating a harmonious work atmosphere. Thus, power in communication is not only the result of individual differences, but also of broader social and cultural processes.

In a sociolinguistic perspective, language is not only a means of communication but also a way to negotiate power and identity. Therefore, changing gender communication patterns in the workplace requires deeper changes, including changing organizational norms and cultures that affect how individuals communicate. This understanding is important in efforts to create an inclusive work environment where men and women can express power in communication without being constrained by traditional gender stereotypes.

C. Patterns of Politeness in Communication Based on Gender

In terms of politeness, this study found that women tend to use polite language more often, such as the use of greetings, expressions of apology, and consideration for coworkers. These results are in line with Mills' research, which found that women tend to maintain high polite etiquette, which is often associated with social expectations of "gentleness" or "femininity" ⁴⁶. Cameron also supports these results by showing that the use of modesty by women is often a strategy for building a harmonious work environment, especially in a hierarchical environment ⁴⁷.

On the other hand, men tend to be more comfortable with a more straightforward and direct communication style. This is in accordance with the results of Holmes research which states that in a masculine work culture, men often use firm communication patterns without much consideration for politeness as a form of efficiency ⁴⁸. Thus, the pattern of politeness in workplace communication seems to reflect gender stereotypes that reinforce the traditional roles of men and women in professional settings.

D. The Impact of Language Patterns on Work Relationships

The findings of the study show that differences in language patterns based on gender have an impact on interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Men who use more direct language are often considered more assertive but less collaborative, while women who use indirect language are considered more collaborative but less assertive. These findings support Tannen's study which shows that differences in communication styles can lead to different interpretations of effectiveness and work ability, which has the potential to affect team performance. Studies by Holmes also indicate that male assertiveness is often seen as a symbol of leadership, while women's collaborative approach is considered more effective in building working relationships.

⁴⁶ Mills, *Gender and Politeness*.

⁴⁷ Cameron, "Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions."

⁴⁸ Holmes, *Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity Through Workplace Discourse*.

Thus, these differences in language patterns not only have implications for individual perceptions of colleagues, but also have an impact on overall work dynamics. When organizations are able to acknowledge and understand these differences, workplace communication strategies can be tailored to minimize conflicts and improve work effectiveness. This understanding is important in creating an inclusive work environment, where differences in gender communication patterns can be appreciated as the strength of diverse teams.

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