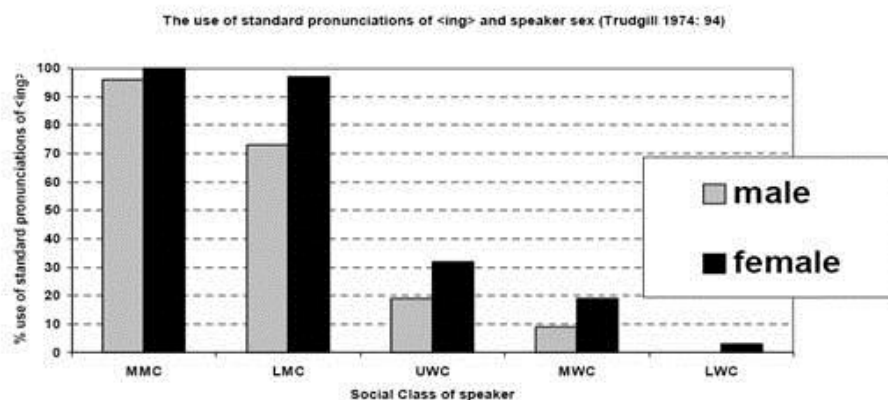


Generalizations on gender and language variation:

Labov (1994), based on a many research works, summarized the three main principles underlying the relationship between linguistic variability and gender.

Principle I. Stable sociolinguistic variables: women use the standard more than men; men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms than women.

Peter Trudgill (1974) studied the classical (ing), which has two alternations /in/ and /iŋ/ and found that across middle class and working class, women tend to use the //iŋ/ more than men do.



Explanation:

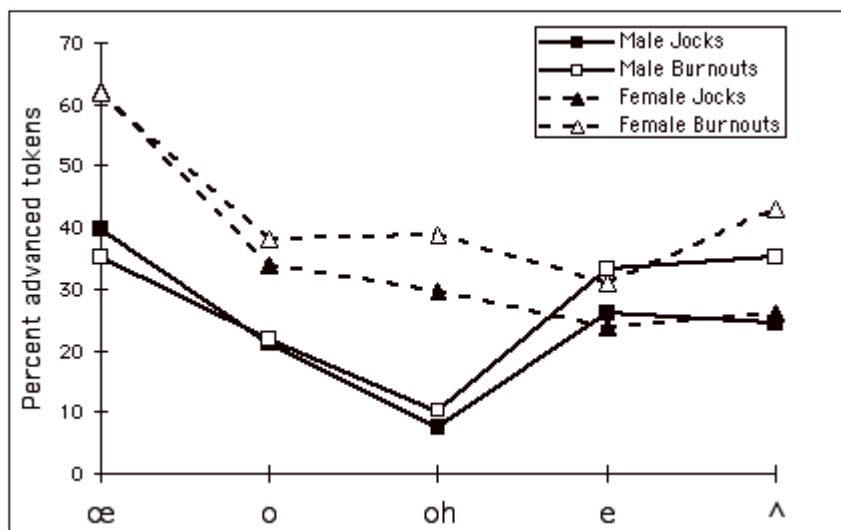
1. For and Trudgill (2004), women use positively evaluated forms because they are highly sensitive to what is standard and what is not.
2. Women focus on how they look, whereas men focus on what they do.

3. Women are encouraged by society to behave in an appropriate way socially and linguistically.
4. Men, however, tend to use more vernacular forms which reflect their masculinity, harshness, and toughness.

Principle Ia. Change in progress above the level of awareness: women use the standard more than men.

In these cases, women tend to use more of the innovative and positively evaluated variant than men do. For instance, Labov (1966) found that within each social class, the postvocalic (r) use was usually more frequent in the speech of women than in the speech of men. Similarly, Milroy and his colleagues (1994) found that replacement of (t) with the voiceless glottal /ʔ/ stop was relatively more frequent among females than it was among the boys.

Principle II. Change from below: women use more of the incoming variant than men.



Women use more of the incoming, negatively sanctioned, non-standard variant.

Eckert (1989), for example, investigated the speech of burnouts Vs jocks groups in Detroit suburbs. She noted that central vowel /ʌ/ was backing in the speech of the burnouts teams, especially among females.

GENDER IN INTERACTION: 'DEFICIT', 'DOMINANCE' AND 'DIFFERENCE'

An important strand of language and gender research has focused on how female and male speakers interact with one another, in a variety of contexts ranging from informal conversations to more formal meetings, interviews, seminars and so on. There is a substantial body of evidence that women and men, and girls and boys interact, to some extent, in different ways. Such differences as occur have often been thought to disadvantage female speakers in mixed-sex interaction. This area of language and gender is one that has a number of practical as well as theoretical implications: within education, for instance, there have been concerns about potential inequalities in classroom talk (Swann 2003). In this section, we review briefly the results of empirical studies carried out since the early 1970s, which have provided evidence of female and male conversational styles. The bulk of this work has been carried out among speakers of English in 'western' contexts such as the USA, the UK and New Zealand. We then examine some areas of debate that have grown out of this research.

Empirical studies of gender and talk have documented several specific features of conversational style that are said to differentiate between female and male speakers. Examples of these are:

Amount of talk: male speakers have been found to talk more than females, particularly in formal or public contexts.

Interruptions: male speakers interrupt female speakers more than vice versa.

Conversational support: female speakers more frequently use features that provide support and encouragement for other speakers, for example 'minimal responses' such as *mmh* and *yeah*.
tentativeness: there are claims that female speakers use features that make their speech appear tentative and uncertain, such as 'hedgies' that weaken the force of an utterance ('I think maybe . . .', 'sort of', 'you know') and certain types of 'tag questions' (questions tagged on to statements, such as ('It's so hot, isn't it?').

Compliments: a wider range of compliments may be addressed to women than to men, and women also tend to pay more compliments.

Such empirical studies show *tendencies*: they suggest that women tend to speak in one way and men in another. Clearly not all women, or all men, talk in the same way, and the way people talk also differs considerably in different contexts. These are points to which we return below. Overall, however, findings such as those listed have given rise to a number of general claims. One long-running area of debate has concerned whether female and male styles are better interpreted in terms of cultural differences between the sexes, or in terms of the relative power of female and male speakers. Robin Lakoff (1975) claimed that women use a number of language features that, collectively, indicate uncertainty and hesitancy. These features, argued Lakoff, deny women the opportunity to express themselves strongly, and make what they are talking about appear trivial. Lakoff's claims have been associated with a **deficit** model of women's language use – she seemed to be suggesting that the way women speak is inadequate in several respects. She related these claims to social inequalities

between women and men, arguing that women's speaking style denied them access to power (1975: 7). Lakoff's claims were based on informal observations and her own intuitions about language use. They have given rise to considerable debate, and have been investigated in several empirical studies, some of which we refer to below. Lakoff herself has revisited these early ideas in a later publication based on her work (Lakoff 2004).

In an early study of interruption patterns that has now become something of a classic, Don Zimmerman and Candace West (1975) found that more interruptions occurred in mixed-sex than in single-sex conversations; and that virtually all the 'mixed-sex' interruptions were perpetrated by men. Zimmerman and West's approach differed from that of Lakoff in that it was based on an empirical study of conversation. They also focused, not on women's inadequacy, but on men's oppressive speaking behaviour. Zimmerman and West saw interruption as a violation of a speaker's right to complete their turn. In interrupting women, they argued, men are denying women's equal status as conversational partners. Zimmerman and West's work has been associated with a **dominance** position on women's and men's language. They related local interactional behaviour to the greater degree of power more generally available to men: 'there are definite and patterned ways in which the power and dominance enjoyed by men in other contexts are exercised in their conversational interaction with women' (1975: 105).

Interpretations in terms of power or dominance have been common among other researchers. In an analysis of conversations between couples, Pamela Fishman (1983) found that women gave more conversational support than men. They expressed interest in their partner's conversational topic, and made more frequent use of minimal responses such as *mmh*, *yeah* and *right*, indicating their involvement. Topics raised by men therefore had a greater chance of success (of being elaborated upon and pursued) than those raised by women. Fishman saw women's conversational supportiveness as an 'expected' characteristic of being female: women are expected to keep conversation going. But she also related her interpretation to power. Power, she argued, is 'a human accomplishment, situated in everyday interaction' (p. 89). It is partly through interaction that the hierarchical relations between women and men are constructed and maintained.

An alternative explanation of women's and men's language use derives from the work of Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982). Maltz and Borker argued that women and men constitute different 'gender subcultures'. They learn the rules of 'friendly interaction' as children when a great deal of interaction takes place in single-sex peer groups. Certain linguistic features are used to signal membership of their own gender group, and to distinguish themselves from the contrasting group. These linguistic features come to have slightly different meanings within the two gender subcultures. For example, in the case of female speakers, minimal responses simply indicate attention – that speakers are listening to the conversation.

For male speakers, however, they indicate agreement with the point being made. It is not surprising, therefore, that female speakers should use them more than male speakers. Such differences in conversational style, however, frequently give rise to misunderstandings when women and men communicate with one another.

This **cultural difference** explanation has been further developed by the US linguist Deborah Tannen in several publications, including her popular but controversial book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (1990). Tannen argues that 'women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence' (1990: 42). Understanding these differences will help people communicate better with one another. Tannen claims, for instance, that men may feel interrupted by women who overlap their speech with words of agreement and support; on the other hand, women are irritated by men who interrupt to change the conversational topic. It's important, in such cases, to understand that women and men are trying to do different things as they talk:

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 center 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 not do so because they are weak or insecure or deferential but because they have little experience in deflecting attempts to grab the conversational wheel. They see steering the conversation in a different direction not as a move in a game, but as a violation of the rules of the game. (Tannen 1990: 215)

The British linguist Jennifer Coates has also been concerned primarily with differences in women's and men's speech, but her approach is different from Tannen's. Coates' position is more explicitly a feminist one: she argues that interpretations of women's and men's speech that relate this primarily to power and male dominance have given rise to a rather negative view of female speaking styles. One of her aims has been to 'revalue' women's talk: 'Early work on women's language had labelled it as "tentative" or "powerless". More recently, and in reaction to this, there has been a move to value women's talk more positively, using terms such as "co-operative"' (Coates 1988: 95). Much of Coates' work has focused on informal conversation in all-female groups (see Coates 1996; in an interesting further study she also contrasts this with talk in all-male groups – Coates 1997). Her account of women's talk is highly positive. She found that the conversations she analysed were characterised by cooperation, with women concerned to support one another's contributions rather than compete for the floor.

Coates provides a useful corrective to the 'deficit' view of women's speech proposed by Lakoff and also to some work in the 'dominance' tradition which, while not suggesting that women's speech was deficient, did imply that it was relatively ineffective. Setting a high value on women's talk, however, and illustrating this with examples from all-female groups, cannot actually refute the claim that women are routinely disadvantaged in interaction with men. The cultural difference position, and particularly the popular work of Deborah Tannen, has attracted more general criticism. Critics such as Aki Uchida

(1992) and Senta Troemel-Ploetz (1991) do not deny that speaking styles associated with women may be valuable in their own right. They are, however, critical of the focus on miscommunication in interactions between female and male speakers. They argue that interpretations based on miscommunication ignore the power dimension in relations between women and men; they ignore the evidence, from a number of studies, that men's 'different' speaking styles allow them to dominate in mixed-sex interaction. Troemel-Ploetz argues that, in her attempt to avoid any negative assessment of men's speaking styles, Tannen is, effectively, cementing patriarchy (p. 150).

Deborah Cameron (1995a, 1995b) is also concerned about the absence of a power dimension in work that takes a cultural difference position. She traces the roots of this to one of the principles that underlie much of modern linguistics: that different language varieties are equal in linguistic terms, and it is wrong to label some varieties as inferior. This relativist position is, she argues, misplaced in relation to language and gender: the relationship between women and men is complementary but unequal, and simply understanding (or even celebrating) difference is to leave this unchallenged. Cameron suggests that this position is untenable particularly for feminist researchers: 'Feminism is not about celebrating the skills required of women by our present arrangements, but about changing those arrangements root and branch. Feminism must question sexual divisions of labour in every sphere of life' (1995b: 198). While critiques of popular accounts of gender differences in language, such as Tannen's work on miscommunication, tend to be published in academic books and journals, Cameron (2007) presents a more popular account, attempting to dispel 'myths' about women's and men's language for a more general audience. Cameron argues that myths matter – for instance, they may affect career opportunities and other life chances. Sociolinguistic evidence is drawn on here as a form of social intervention designed to encourage – and enable – people to question popular stereotypes.