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Gender, politeness, and discourse management in same-sex and cross-sex opinion-poll interviews

Barbara Johnstone, Kathleen Ferrara and Judith Mattson Bean*

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This paper looks at 48 telephone public-opinion survey interviews conducted by female interviewers. In 23 interviews respondents are women, while in 25 interviews respondents are men. We ask whether the interviewers, who work from a script and deviate from it only for pressing reasons, use language differently with women than with men. Specifically, we look at politeness strategies, by which the interviewer keeps the respondent involved and willing to continue, and discourse management techniques, by which the interviewer handles the flow of topics and turns and ensures that she gets the sorts of answers she needs. We find small but interesting differences in politeness: female respondents elicit more sympathy and understanding, while male respondents elicit more attention to their wants and needs and more joking. For discourse management we find more substantial differences: male respondents are managed more in almost every way. This may be because men are less comfortable with this discourse type, in which interviewers control topic and turn-allocation, than are women, and hence less compliant and more eager to subvert the interview by turning it into teasing or banter. Our findings suggest that even anonymous, information-oriented discourse is crucially interactional and point to the importance of discourse management in non-conversational genres.

1. Introduction

Do women talk differently to women than to men? Anecdotal evidence – our own experience as women and reports from many other men and women – suggests that they do. Few formal studies focus explicitly on sociolinguistic

Correspondence to: B. Johnstone, Department of English, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, USA.

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effects of addressees' gender, but those that do, or that touch on the subject tangentially, suggest that there are such effects. Shopen (ms., discussed in Trudgill 1986: 8) found that Australian men and women used more higher-status pronunciations when their addressees were women than when they were men. Following up on research by Brouwer et al. (1979) about interactions at Dutch train ticket windows, Brouwer (1982) showed that male and female clients were more polite to male ticket-sellers than to female ones; Brouwer defines more polite speech as speech including more salutations, more modal constructions (*may I; could you*), and more frequent occurrences of *please* and *thank you*. In New Zealand studies, Holmes (1988, 1989) found that women complimented and apologized to other women more often than they complimented or apologized to men.

In this paper we report on a study designed to provide another piece of the answer to the question of whether women talk differently to women than they do to men, and if so, why. Our data consists of 48 telephone public-opinion interviews, audiotaped and transcribed, between 15 and 45 minutes long. The interviews were administered by 18 interviewers, all middle-class American women in their twenties. We analyze these interviewers' strategies for managing the flow of discourse and for displaying the politeness required to keep the interaction going. The interviewers were employed by the Texas Poll, a non-partisan polling service that conducts quarterly public-opinion surveys on behalf of government agencies, non-profit organizations, and academic researchers. We focus on female interviewers not only because we are interested in questions of audience design as they relate to women, but also because most of the interviewers for the particular polling service we are studying, like most opinion-poll interviewers, are women. We are thus focusing on how women talk in performing a predominantly female job.

Respondents to the poll are residents of Texas selected by means of random-digit telephone dialing. In the set of interviews we examine, all the respondents were Anglo-American; approximately half were men (25) and half women (23). (So as to avoid unduly complicating the set of variables we are working with, we chose not to look in this paper at interviews with African-American or Hispanic respondents.) The distribution of ages, income levels, and education levels was the same for the male and female respondents. The youngest respondents were 18, the oldest in their sixties. The survey, conducted in January, 1989, included questions about the performance of various public officials, questions about issues such as gun control, health care, abortion, and nuclear energy, and a set of fill-in-the-blank sentences designed to elicit phonological variation. At the end of the interview, respondents were asked about their age, education, occupation, income, and religious and political affiliation. The interviewers conducted the interviews from a script.

Because they are scripted, interviews like these are in many ways ideal data

for a controlled study of variation in natural speech, more so than most genres. The overall structure of the conversation and the sequence of topics are identical from interview to interview: the interviewer reads mainly multiple-choice questions from the script, the respondent answers them, and the interviewer records the answers. Since interviewers are trained to stray as little as possible from the script, and paid for collecting information rather than for having pleasant conversations, it can be assumed that deviations from the script occur only for pressing reasons. Analysis of the forms and functions of these deviations can thus shed light on the most basic exigencies of communication, same-sex or cross-sex.

In particular, the interviews provide abundant evidence about linguistic politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) and about the negotiation of power and control in an important genre of professional talk. The 'cold call' is among the most egregious of offenses to people's right to decide whom they wish to interact with, and this infraction must repeatedly be remedied by the interviewer so that the respondent will remain willing to cooperate. At the same time, the interviewer must control the flow of talk, in order to get the information she needs for the questionnaire she must fill out. Interviewers are thus in the position of having to take charge of an interaction with sometimes unwilling interlocutors who are doing them a favor by participating. It will not be surprising to find that they manage this task by subtle trade-offs of apparent power and control.

The results of this study should be interesting for several reasons. As Eckert (1989), among many others, points out, the relationship between gender and sociolinguistic variation is more complex than we once thought. Women may talk differently than men, as considerable research has shown (see Coates 1986, Tannen 1990 for overviews), but the reasons for this keep becoming less clear rather than more clear. As interactional patterns emerge in discourse, gender may be but one of an array of linguistic, psychological, sociological, and rhetorical variables that make the patterns take the shapes they do. And as Eliasoph (1986) suggests, different speech situations may not accommodate male and female ways of talking equally well. Our question is one of many that needs to be asked in the effort to find out exactly what the mechanisms of what we blithely used to call 'women's language' really are. Our results are also a contribution to the analysis of rhetorical 'audience design' in discourse (Bell 1984), and to current scrutiny of the nature of linguistic politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987, Kasper 1990, Fraser 1990). The public-opinion survey is a speech event that is both very familiar to Americans (most people know how an interview is supposed to proceed, and they read and hear the results of public-opinion surveys regularly) and quite unfamiliar (relatively few people have actually been called for a survey). Our study thus also contributes to the growing research literature about what goes on when new genres and registers emerge in discourse (e.g. Ferrara et al. 1991), and in particular to the study of language in work settings.

2. Politeness and discourse management in the Texas Poll interviews

Texas Poll interviewers are trained to depart from their written script only when absolutely necessary. As do the British journalists studied by Greatbatch (1988), interviewers for the most part behave in ways that suggest they believe that they should "properly avoid producing talk which is not implicated in the work of questioning" (p. 413). Thus any deviations from the script by the interviewer can be assumed to serve the interactional functions that are most vital (from the interviewer's perspective) in this speech event: to keep the respondent from hanging up the phone, and to ensure that the respondent hears and understands all the questions and answers them in appropriate ways (that is, ways which are codable on the interviewer's questionnaire sheet[1]) and that the interview is completed. By examining the types and frequency of interviewers' deviations from the script when the respondents are women and when the respondents are men, we should be able to see whether systematic differences are correlated with the gender of the addressees.

The Texas Poll interviewers must perform a number of speech tasks. They start the interviews, introducing the Texas Poll and asking for cooperation. They ask questions, reading them from the script and clarifying them when necessary (though preferably, and usually, without interpreting them). Interviewers make sure the questions are answered and encode or copy down the answers, probe for more complete or clearly codable versions, and acknowledge them. All these tasks have to do with managing the interview, with orchestrating the question-and-answer turn-taking sequence. As they do this, interviewers also have the overarching responsibility of keeping the talk going. They have to make sure the respondent continues to want to cooperate. This involves being polite in general, and in particular managing potential threats to the respondents' dignity such as questions respondents cannot answer or requests to divulge personal information.

We have accordingly subdivided departures from the script into two general categories: (1) discourse-management techniques and (2) politeness strategies. By discourse-management techniques, we mean unscripted vocalizations interviewers use to manage the flow of talk in the interview. These include, for

[1] For example, a typical question, as it appears on the questionnaire, is this: TQ1. Overall, how would you rate Texas as a place to live ... [READ LIST]

Excellent	1
Good	2
Only Fair	3
Poor	4
Don't know	8
Refused/NA	9

The interviewer had to get one of these answers; if the respondent said "Great", or "I like it just fine", the interviewer had to do what was necessary to find out what that corresponded to on her list.

example, indicating to the respondent what the appropriate format for an answer is, making sure the respondent knows when open-ended answers are being copied verbatim, keeping the floor during the pause necessary to copy the answers, reclaiming the floor after interruptions, and probing or rephrasing answers to elicit appropriately formatted ones.

While discourse-management techniques are used to manage the *interview*, politeness strategies are used to manage the *respondent*, to make sure that he or she begins cooperating at the outset of the interview and continues to cooperate during it. Our analysis of politeness strategies is based on that of Brown and Levinson (1987): 'positive politeness' is realized in linguistic strategies that promote closeness and solidarity, 'negative politeness' in strategies that convey deference and respect. While Brown and Levinson's analysis has been criticized (Kasper 1990, Fraser 1990), it has been extremely influential in the study of linguistic politeness, and using it makes our study more easily comparable to other work than it would be if we defined politeness in an idiosyncratic way.

On the basis of preliminary scrutiny, we identified seven positive politeness strategies and four negative politeness strategies realized in deviations from the script in the interviews. These are listed in figure 1, numbered as they are in Brown and Levinson's taxonomies (1987: 102, 131).

Positive politeness strategies
P1: Notice, attend to interests, wants, needs of respondent
P5: Seek agreement
P6: Avoid disagreement
P7: Claim common ground
P8: Joke
P10: Make offers, promises
P15: Give sympathy, understanding, cooperation

Negative politeness strategies
N2: Hedge
N4: Minimize the imposition
N5: Give deference
N6: Apologize

Fig. 1. Politeness strategies.

We also identified 15 discourse management techniques, each having to do with a task or subtask required to manage the interview. These are listed in figure 2.

M1: Explain the interview or guide respondent through it (what the interview is for, how many questions there are, how long it will take, how many more sections remain, etc.)
M2: Ask respondent for cooperation during the interview (after the initial, scripted, request for cooperation)
M3: Repeat a question when requested to by respondent
M4: Explain or indicate what the appropriate answer format is
M5: Probe for an answer that fits the appropriate format
M6: Rephrase an answer so that it fits the appropriate format
M7: Request respondent to repeat an answer
M8: Repeat an answer to insure interviewer has heard it correctly
M9: Clarify a question when requested to by respondent
M10: Clarify a question when the answer does not fit the required format (i.e. when interviewer infers that respondent has misinterpreted the question)
M11: Request time to copy a response down
M12: Repeat an answer while copying it down
M13: Talk to keep floor while finding place on the script (Some sets of questions are rotated to minimize the effect of question order, so interviewers have to skip around on the script, and they occasionally lose their places.)
M14: Respond to interruptions; regain the floor
M15: Thank respondent during interview (before the final, scripted expression of thanks)

Fig. 2. Discourse management techniques.

Our procedure was to locate each deviation from the script and code it with a number identifying it with one or another of these politeness strategies or discourse management techniques. Our specific research questions are these: (1) Do the female interviewers use different politeness strategies with the male respondents than with the female respondents? (2) Do the female interviewers use different discourse management techniques with the female respondents than with the male respondents? (3) If there are differences, what appears to account for them?

3. Findings

On the whole, politeness strategies occurred slightly more frequently per interview when interviewees were men than when they were women; the differences are not statistically significant, however.[2] This is true for positive as well as negative politeness, as shown in table 1.

[2] The interviews vary widely in length, but the variables we are examining – instances of politeness and discourse management – are precisely what account for the variance. (In other words, if there were none of the unscripted expressions of politeness or techniques for discourse management we are examining, then all interviews would consist of the same number of

Table 1
Mean number of tokens of politeness per interview.

	With male respondents ($N = 25$)	With female respondents ($N = 23$)
Positive politeness tokens	11.4	10.7
Negative politeness tokens	7.7	6.1
Total politeness tokens	19.1	16.8

Far more interesting than these overall totals, however, are the differences correlated with gender in interviewers' use of particular strategies and techniques. First we discuss differences in positive politeness, then we turn to differences in negative politeness, and finally, we deal with differences in discourse management.

3.1. Positive politeness

The two types of positive politeness used most often with both men and women are P1 (notice, attend to interests, wants, needs) and P5 (give sympathy, understanding, cooperation). Table 2 presents these figures and others relevant to positive politeness. The strategies indicated by arrows – P1, P7, P8, and P15 – merit discussion; others are used about equally often with men and with women. The table is organized as follows: the first two columns identify strategies and give total numbers of occurrences. The third column shows how many interviews in each set involved the interviewer's using the strategy at least once, and the fourth column states this figure as a percentage. The fifth and sixth columns indicate how often, when the strategy occurred at all, it did occur, the fifth column giving the range of occurrences and the sixth expressing this as a mean. The final column gives the mean number of occurrences of the strategy over all the interviews.

utterances, in fact probably very close to the same number of words.) To normalize interview length by counting tokens of politeness and discourse management per turn or utterance rather than per interview would be to render invisible the very differences we are interested in. Thus the relevant figures are politeness and discourse-management tokens per interview rather than per utterance, T-unit, or some other smaller unit of analysis (Crookes 1990). With Hymes (1972) and other ethnographers of communication, we hold that the speech event (in this case the interview) is also a potentially valid unit in the analysis of discourse.

Table 2
Positive politeness strategies with men and with women.

Strategy	# of tokens (M/F)	# ints. with strat. (M/F) [N = 25/23]	% ints. with strat. (M/F)	Range, least to most (M/F)	Mean, ints. where used (M/F)	Mean, all ints. (M/F)
→ P1	182/123	22/21	88%/91%	1–30/1–18	8.3/5.8	7.3/5.3
P5	5/6	4/6	16%/26%	1–2/1–1	1.2/1.0	0.2/0.3
P6	9/5	3/3	12%/13%	1–6/1–2	3.0/1.7	0.4/0.2
→ P7	11/10	7/4	28%/17%	1–4/1–6	1.4/2.5	0.4/0.4
→ P8	19/14	9/4	36%/17%	1–5/1–6	2.1/3.5	0.8/0.6
P10	3/6	3/4	12%/17%	1–1/1–2	1.0/1.5	0.1/0.2
→ P15	56/82	15/17	60%/74%	1–8/1–13	3.7/4.8	2.2/3.6
					Totals	11.4/10.7

Key
P1: Notice, attend to interests, wants, needs of respondent
P5: Seek agreement
P6: Avoid disagreement
P7: Claim common ground
P8: Joke
P10: Make offers, promises
P15: Give sympathy, understanding, cooperation

We performed chi-square tests on all the male addressee–female addressee differences in politeness and discourse management. Because of the relatively small number of tokens of positive politeness in the interviews, none of the differences could be shown to be statistically significant. Though P1 (noticing, attending to the respondent's wants and needs) was used in a slightly higher percentage of interviews with women (91%) than interviews with men (88%), when interviews with men included this type of politeness, they included more tokens, on average 8.3 instances per interview, as opposed to 5.8 per female respondent. Up to 30 tokens per interview were used with men, whereas the highest number of tokens in an interview with a woman was 18. This category encompassed a wide range of tactics, including laughter, which may account for its frequency.[3] P1 tokens in table 2 could be further broken down: in interviews with men, 81% of the P1 tokens represent laughter or talk

[3] Brown and Levinson's taxonomies of positive and negative politeness strategies yield categories which, for the interlocutors studied here and for this speech event, are not all equally large. There are many more ways to notice and attend to a respondent's wants and needs, and many more ways to give sympathy, understanding, and cooperation than there are ways to seek agreement or claim common ground, for example. This is not a defect in Brown and Levinson's taxonomies, of course, but it does mean that the taxonomies are a less elegant research tool than we originally anticipated.

accompanied by laughter. With women 71% of the P1 tokens represent laughter. Examples of P1 are these (with the relevant portions in italics):[4]

(1) *Attend to wants, needs*
TRA T456 S191 male 37
Int.: Okay. Do you have any adult children living away from home? Young children at home? Or no children?
Resp.: Just one on the way.
Int.: Excuse me?
Resp.: Just one on the way.
Int.: *You have one on the way? Really? Ohh!*

(2) *Attend to wants, needs*
JAC T494 S941 female 18–29
Int.: All right. You have anything else you want to say about problems in the state?
Resp.: Oh goodness. I don't know enough about the problems.
Int.: ((laugh)) Okay.
Resp.: I just listen to what my husband says.
Int.: Okay. (2) *This is YOUR chance.*
Resp.: ((laugh))

P15 (giving sympathy, understanding, cooperation) was used more often with women (in 74% of the interviews) than with men (in 60% of the interviews). The average for all female respondents was 3.6 occurrences, compared to 2.2 for all male respondents. Examples of this strategy are these:

[4] Transcription conventions:
Unfilled parentheses designate unintelligible talk, filled parentheses guesses about less-than-clear segments of tape.
Equal signs on consecutive lines indicate 'latched' talk following immediately on the preceding turn.
Int.: I'm sorry, go ahead=
Resp.: =That's kind of a ...
Square brackets on consecutive lines indicate overlapping talk, beginning at left bracket and continuing to right bracket.
Int.: I'm sorry that we missed the callback [again, I really am.]
Resp.: [Oh okay,] that's all right.
Double parentheses enclose descriptions of paralinguistic behavior or pause. ((laughs))
Especially loud, stressed talk is in caps.
Pauses of less than 0.5 second are indicated with ellipses, the number of dots corresponding roughly to the length of the pause. Pauses longer than 0.5 second are represented by a number indicating the length of the pause in seconds, in single parentheses.