CHAPTER 6

Gender differences in conversational practice

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6.1 The concept of communicative competence

So far I have used the term *language* in the narrow sense of grammar and phonology, the formal structure of language. The gender differences in language described in Chapters 4 and 5 were differences in women's and men's syntax, morphology and pronunciation. This focus on linguistic form, with the sentence as the highest unit of structure, was established in linguistics and has been carried over into sociolinguistics: there are many sociolinguists who consider studies of social variation in grammar and phonology to be 'sociolinguistics proper'. It is becoming more and more apparent, however, that this view of language is far too narrow. The sociolinguist has to deal with real language data from a wide variety of situations; you will know if you have ever studied conversational interaction that you cannot deal adequately with it if you restrict yourself to sentence grammar.

In response to the growing awareness that the study of language should be more than the study of grammar and phonology, new disciplines have emerged such as discourse analysis and pragmatics, while others, such as ethnomethodology, conversation analysis (CA) and speech act theory, have experienced a revival of interest. The concept which marks the beginning of this revival of interest in language in its broadest sense is **communicative competence**. The term was first used by Dell Hymes (1972). He argued that it was essential to incorporate social and cultural factors into linguistic description. In his view, the Chomskyan notion of the child internalising a set of rules which enable her or him to produce grammatical sentences doesn't go far enough: the child learns not just grammar but also a sense of **appropriateness**. It is not sufficient for the child to be linguistically competent; in order to function in the real world, she or he must also learn when to speak,

when to remain silent, what to talk about – and how to talk about it – in different circumstances. Imagine someone who speaks at the same time as others, who doesn't respond to questions, who looks away when addressed, who stands embarrassingly close to others, who doesn't laugh when someone tells a joke, etc. Such a person might use well-formed sentences, but we would all recognise that she or he was *incompetent* in an important sense. It is this knowledge of how language is used in a given society which constitutes communicative competence.

6.2 The communicative competence of women and men

In this chapter I shall look at ways in which women and men seem to differ in terms of their communicative competence. Our knowledge as members of a speech community of how to pay a compliment or how to apologise is part of our communicative competence, but the research evidence suggests that women and men develop differentiated communicative competence: in other words, women's and men's behaviour in conversation suggests that they have a different understanding of how a compliment or an apology is done. Such differences have led some researchers to talk of different female and male 'styles' in conversation (e.g. Maltz and Borker 1982). (The notion of gender-differentiated conversational styles will be explored further in Chapter 8.)

Gender differences in communicative competence are part of folk knowledge (as we saw in Chapter 2). In Britain, for example, we all grow up to believe that women talk more than men, that women 'gossip', that men swear more than women, that women are more polite, and so on. Research in this area often directly challenges cultural stereotypes, since much of the folklore associated with male/female differences turns out to be false.

The main section in this chapter will focus on gender differences in communicative competence, presenting evidence from a range of studies where male and female speakers differ in their use of particular conversational strategies. I will then look at language choice in bilingual communities, at gossip and whether or not it is a gendered activity, and at politeness and its linguistic correlates. The chapter will end with an examination of the question, 'Is women's language really powerless language?'

6.3 Gender and conversational strategies

This section will explore the way in which women and men characteristically draw on different strategies in conversational interaction. I shall concentrate on the following aspects of conversational practice: minimal responses, hedges, tag questions, questions, commands and directives, swearing and taboo language, and compliments.

Minimal responses

Minimal responses – sometimes called 'back-channels' – are forms such as *yeah* or *right* or *mhm*. The following extract illustrates the way they are used by listeners in conversation (listener's responses in brackets):

(1) and this put her into a bit of a flap (*mhm*) so before she could do anything about this she had to pull forwards (*mhm*) in order to er to open the gates so she took the car out of reverse, put it into first gear (*yeah*) and pulled forward very gently (*yeah*).
(Crystal and Davy 1975: 44)

Research on the use of minimal responses is unanimous in showing that women use them more than men, and at appropriate moments, that is, at points in conversation which indicate the listener's support for the current speaker (Strodtbeck and Mann 1956; Hirschmann 1974; Zimmerman and West 1975; Fishman 1980a; Coates 1989, 1991, 1994; Holmes 1995). Holmes (1995: 55) asks rhetorically whether minimal responses are 'a female speciality'. She gives the following example, from a conversation where two women are talking about a good teacher. Lyn's use of minimal responses throughout this extract illustrates women's sensitive use of minimal responses in talk. Notice how skilfully placed the minimal responses are – not overlapping what Tina is saying, nor interrupting the flow of Tina's talk. [This example is transcribed using stave notation, like a musical score. The contributions of Tina and Lyn can then be seen in relation to each other.]

(2)
Tina: she provided the appropriate sayings for
Lyn:
Tina: particular times and and so on
Lyn: right right
Tina: she didn't actually TEACH them but
Lyn:
Tina: she just provided a model
Lyn: provided a model
Tina: you know you- you must refer to this
Lyn: yeah mhm mhm
Tina: and this and she actually produced a book
Lyn: mhm mhm
Tina: that set out some of these ideas at the very
Lyn: mhm
Tina: simplest level
Lyn: yeah
(from Holmes 1995: 55)

This extract comes from same-sex conversation. In *mixed* interaction, Fishman (1980b) describes women's skilful use of minimal responses as 'interactional

shitwork'. She concludes that there is a division of labour in conversation which supports men and women in positions of power and powerlessness respectively. As we will see in the next chapter (section 7.3), when men *do* use minimal responses, these are often delayed, a tactic which undermines the current speaker and reinforces male dominance.

Hedges

Women's speech is often described as 'tentative', and this assertion is linked to the claim that women use more **hedges**. Hedges are linguistic forms such as *I think*, *I'm sure*, *you know*, *sort of* and *perhaps* which express the speaker's certainty or uncertainty about the proposition under discussion. A recent newcomer to the class of hedges is the word *like*, which is used by younger speakers all over the English-speaking world to mitigate the force of utterances (see, for example, Underhill 1988; Andersen 1997; Irwin 2002). Robin Lakoff explicitly linked women's use of hedges with unassertiveness. She claimed that women's speech contains more hedges (a claim based on no empirical evidence), and argued that this is because women 'are socialised to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn't nice or ladylike, or even feminine' (Lakoff 1975: 54).

Surprisingly few researchers have carried out empirical work designed to investigate Lakoff's claims. The few studies there have been show that in some situations women *do* use more hedges, but suggest that we need to be sensitive to the different *functions* of hedges, and also need to query the (androcentric) assumption that more frequent use of hedges is a weakness.

One relatively straightforward piece of research focusing on the expression of tentativeness was carried out by Bent Preisler (1986). He recorded groups of four people (some single-sex, some mixed) discussing controversial subjects such as violence on television or corporal punishment for children. His sample consisted of women and men from two different age groups (20–25 and 45–50) and from three occupational groups. All the informants lived and worked in Lancaster (northern England). His analysis showed that the women in his sample used significantly more hedges than the men.

Janet Holmes's analysis (based on a corpus consisting of equal amounts of male and female speech) is more delicate than Preisler's, because she distinguishes between the different functions served by hedges (Holmes 1984, 1987). Instances of *you know* in her data, for example, are categorised into two broad groups: one where *you know* expresses the speaker's confidence or certainty, as in the following example (examples from Holmes 1987):

(3) and that way we'd get rid of exploitation of man by man all that stuff/ *you knòw/* you've heard it before
[*radio interviewee describing past experience*]

and one where *you know* expresses uncertainty of various kinds (note the rising intonation here):

(4) and it was quite// well it was it was all very embarrassing *you knów* [*young woman to close friend*]

Table 6.1 summarises the distribution of these two different functions in women's and men's speech.

Table 6.1: Distribution of *you know* by function and speaker's gender (Holmes 1987: 64)

Function of *you know*	Female	Male
Expressing confidence	56	37 (p = 0.05)
Expressing uncertainty	33	50
Totals	89	87

This table shows that the women recorded by Holmes use *you know* more frequently than men when it expresses confidence, but less frequently when it expresses uncertainty. Holmes's sensitive analysis demonstrates that hedges are multifunctional, and that any analysis of gender differences needs to allow for this. Moreover, her findings challenge Lakoff's blanket assertion that women use more hedges than men, as well as Lakoff's claim that women's use of hedges is related to lack of confidence, since female speakers used *you know* more in its confident sense.

Research focusing on adolescent speakers claims that young people use *like* as a hedging device 'to partially detach themselves from the force of utterances that could be considered evaluative, either positively evaluative of self or negatively evaluative of others' (Irwin 2002: 171). The following example shows how Anna uses *like* to avoid boasting:

(5) [*Context: Anna, Cassie, Emma and Jill talking during a break at their drama group*]

Anna: Josephine used to come here and I was her *like* really good friends with her she was *like* my best friend [italics added]

She uses *like* to hedge her potentially boastful claim to have been 'really good friends' with Josephine and that Josephine was her 'best friend'. By contrast, when she talks about neutral facts, she does not use *like*, as example (6) shows (this example follows straight on from the previous one):

(6) *Anna*: so I decided to come [to drama group] one day and it was quite good

Compare this with the possible utterance 'so I decided to like come one day and it was like quite good'. Cassie in the next example uses *like* and *kind of* to hedge her remarks which deal with the clearly controversial topic of going out with a much older boy:

(7) [*Context: Cassie talking to Lana about boyfriends and parents*]

Cassie: if it's one of those boys who kind of *like* you meet somewhere and you're kind of going out with them and they're *like* (.) they're *like* twenty-one or something [italics added]

Note how Cassie repeats *like* in the final clause here – *and they're <u>like</u> (.) they're <u>like</u> twenty-one or something*. This repetition seems to mark even more clearly that she wants to distance herself from what she is saying. Irwin, like other researchers, notes that *like* is more frequently used by girls than by boys, and more by middle-class girls than by working-class girls.

A possible reason for male speakers' apparently lower usage of hedges is their choice of topics: unlike female speakers, male speakers on the whole avoid sensitive topics. They only rarely self-disclose and prefer to talk about impersonal subjects (see section 8.2.2 for further discussion). When sensitive topics are under discussion, then hedges become a valuable resource for speakers, because they mitigate the force of what is said and thus protect both speaker's and hearer's face.

Tag questions

Lakoff (1975) nominated the tag question as one of the linguistic forms associated with tentativeness, but provided no empirical evidence to show that women use more tag questions than men. According to Lakoff, tag questions decrease the strength of assertions. Compare the two sentences below:

(8a) The crisis in the Middle East is terrible.

(8b) The crisis in the Middle East is terrible, isn't it?

Lakoff claims that women use sentences like (8b), which contains the tag question *isn't it*, more often than men, who are supposed to favour (8a).

Siegler and Siegler (1976) presented students with sixteen sentences, four of which were assertions with tag questions like (8b) above. The students were told that the sentences came from conversations between college students, and for each sentence were asked to guess whether a woman or a man produced it originally. The results of this test supported Lakoff's hypothesis: sentences with tag questions were most often attributed to women, while strong assertions, like (8a), were most often attributed to men (the difference in attributions was statistically significant). This, however, only confirms what speakers' *attitudes* are; it doesn't prove that women actually use more tag questions.

While several studies have confirmed that English speakers *assume* a connection between tag questions and female linguistic usage (see O'Barr and Atkins 1980; Jones 1980, to be discussed in sections 6.7 and 8.1 respectively), one of the rare studies which set out to test this assumption empirically found it unproven. Dubois and Crouch (1975) used as their data the discussion sessions following various formal papers given at a day conference. They listed all

examples of formal tag questions (such as 'Probably industrial too, isn't it?') as well as 'informal' tags (such as 'Right?', 'OK?' as in 'That's not too easy, right?'). A total of thirty-three tag questions was recorded (seventeen formal and sixteen informal) and these were *all* produced by men. By contrast, Preisler's (1986) research reveals that tag questions, in *combination with* other linguistic forms (e.g. certain modals and other stressed auxiliaries), are used significantly more by women than by men.

All this work is based on the questionable assumption that there is a one-to-one relationship between linguistic form (tag question) and extra-linguistic factor (tentativeness). Refreshingly, Holmes (1984) analyses tags according to whether they express primarily **modal** or **affective** meaning. Tags with primarily **modal** meaning signal the speaker's degree of certainty about the proposition expressed:

(9) She's coming around noon isn't she?
(*Husband to wife concerning expected guest*)

Such tags can be described as **speaker-oriented** since they ask the addressee to confirm the speaker's proposition. Tags whose primary function is **affective** express the speaker's attitude to the addressee (and are therefore **addressee-oriented)**. They do this either by supporting the addressee (facilitative tags):

(10) The hen's brown isn't she?
(*Teacher to pupil*)

or by softening the force of negatively affective speech acts:

(11) That was pretty silly wasn't it?
(*Older child to younger friend*)

Table 6.2 shows the overall distribution of tags in a 60,000-word corpus consisting of equal amounts of female and male speech in matched contexts.

Table 6.2: Distribution of tag questions according to speaker's gender and function of tag in discourse (based on Holmes 1984: 54)

Type of meaning	No. of tag questions	
	Female	Male
Modal meaning		
Expressing uncertainty	18 (35%)	24 (61%)
Affective meaning		
Facilitative	30 (59%)	10 (25%)
Softening	3 (6%)	5 (13%)
Total	51	39

Women and men do not differ greatly in total usage (but note that women do turn out to use more tags). However, the important point to notice is that 59 per cent of the tags used by women are facilitative (compared with 25 per cent for men) while 61 per cent of the tags used by men are modal, expressing uncertainty (compared with 35 per cent for women).

When the relationship between the participants in the interaction is taken into account, it emerges that **facilitators** are more likely to use tags than non-facilitators (Holmes uses the term *facilitator* to refer to those responsible for ensuring that interaction proceeds smoothly, for example, interviewers on radio and television, discussion group leaders, teachers, hosts). Moreover, women are more likely than men to use tags when acting as facilitators. The significance of Holmes's findings will be taken up in the discussion of women and politeness (section 6.6) and of women and powerless language (section 6.7).

Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary's (1989) study of tag questions supports Holmes's findings. They looked at gender differences in tag usage in both symmetrical and asymmetrical discourse. In asymmetrical discourse (i.e. in discourse where participants are not equal in status), the striking finding was that powerless participants *never* used affective tags. Table 6.3 gives the details.

Table 6.3: Tag questions in unequal encounters (Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary 1989: 89)

	Women		Men	
	Powerful	Powerless	Powerful	Powerless
Modal	3 (5%)	9 (15%)	10 (18%)	16 (29%)
Affective				
Facilitative	43 (70%)	0 –	25 (45%)	0 –
Softeners	6 (10%)	0 –	4 (7%)	0 –
Total		61		55

It seems that affective tags are associated with *powerful* speakers, a finding which challenges Lakoff's assumption that tags are intrinsically weak. This finding will be discussed further in the following section on questions.

Questions

Fishman (1980a) analysed her transcripts of couples in conversation for questions as well as for *you know*. She looked at yes/no questions such as 'Did you

see Sarah last night?' as well as at tag questions. The women in her sample used three times as many tag and yes/no questions as the men (87:29). During the 12.5 hours of conversation transcribed, a total of 370 questions was asked, of which women asked 263 (2.5 times as many as the men). A survey of the linguistic behaviour of people buying a ticket at Central Station in Amsterdam also established that women ask more questions than men, especially when addressing a *male* ticket-seller (Brouwer et al. 1979). Why should this be so? Are men seen as repositories of knowledge and women as ignorant? Perhaps women feel less inhibited about asking for information, since this does not conflict with the gender-role prescribed by society. Fishman prefers to explain women's question-asking in linguistic terms. Questions are part of the conversational sequencing device Question + Answer. Questions and answers are linked together in conversation: questions demand a response from the addressee. In interactive terms, then, questions are stronger than statements, since they give the speaker the power to elicit a response. In the following extract (taken from Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1960)) note how Petey is forced to participate in conversation by Meg's use of questions:

(12) (*Meg gives Petey a bowl of cornflakes. He sits at the table, props up his paper and starts to eat*)

Meg: Are they nice?

Petey: Very nice.

Meg: I thought they'd be nice. You got your paper?

Petey: Yes.

Meg: Is it good?

Petey: Not bad.

Meg: What does it say?

Petey: Nothing much.

Research findings so far suggest that women use interrogative forms more than men and that this may reflect women's relative weakness in interactive situations: they exploit questions and tag questions in order to keep conversation going.

However, as Cameron et al.'s (1989) research on tag questions demonstrates, some kinds of question are associated with *powerful* speakers. Sandra Harris, in her study of the language of magistrates' courts, established that questions are a crucial resource for powerful participants, since questions oblige the addressee both to produce an answer and to produce an answer that is conversationally relevant. In other words, questions control what the next speaker is able to say. Not only do powerful participants use many questions, but also participants *without* power are explicitly prohibited from using them in this situation:

(13) *Magistrate*: I'm putting it to you again – are you going to make an offer – wh–wh– to discharge this debt?

Defendant: Would you in my position?

Magistrate: I – I'm not here to answer questions – you answer *my* question

(Harris 1984: 5)

Research into other sorts of asymmetrical discourse, such as doctor–patient interaction (Fairclough 1992; West 1984; Todd 1993), teacher–pupil interaction (Barnes 1971; Stubbs 1983), or talk between host and callers on radio phone-ins (Barnard 2000; Thornborrow 2002) confirms this finding: questions are overwhelmingly used by more powerful participants.

In contexts where men and women are supposedly status equals but where the context has high status, men ask far more questions than women. This finding emerges in several studies: in a study of academic seminars at Durham University (Bashiruddin et al. 1990), in research analysing questions following formal presentations at conferences (Swacker 1979; Holmes 1988b), and in research analysing questions and other elicitations following public meetings (Holmes 1995). Moreover, if questions in such contexts are categorised as supportive, critical or antagonistic, analysis revealed that male and female speakers asked a similar proportion of supportive and critical questions. What varied was their use of antagonistic questions, with men challenging the presenter twice as often as women (Holmes 1995).

Thus, while it seems that in some situations women use more questions than men, in others it is men who ask more questions, while sometimes the relevant variable is occupational status not gender. If we are to make sense of the way questions are used in speech, we have to distinguish between the different functions of questions, and we have to keep symmetrical and asymmetrical discourse separate. It is certainly true that questions are powerful linguistic forms: they give the speaker the power to elicit a response from the other participant(s). This characteristic of questions is exploited by powerful participants in asymmetrical situations; it is also exploited by women speakers – relatively powerless participants in many contexts – to keep conversation going.

Commands and directives

We can define a directive as a speech act which tries to get someone to do something. Goodwin (1980, 1990, 2011) observed the group play of girls and boys in a Philadelphia street, and noticed that the boys used different sorts of directives from the girls. The boys used explicit commands:

(14) *Michael*: Gimme the pliers (*Poochie gives pliers to Michael*)

(15) *Huey*: Get off my steps (*Poochie moves down steps*)

Michael, the leader of the group, often supported his commands with statements of his own desires:

(16) *Michael*: Gimme the wire . . . Look man, I want the wire cutters right now.

Goodwin calls examples like these 'aggravated' directives. The boys tended to choose aggravated directives and used them to establish status differences between themselves. The girls, by contrast, typically used more 'mitigated' directives such as the following:

(17) *Terry*: Hey y'all let's use these first and then come back and get the rest cuz it's too many of 'em.

(18) *Sharon*: Let's go around Subs and Suds.
Pam: Let's ask her 'do you have any bottles?'

The form *let's* explicitly includes the speaker together with the addressee(s) in the proposed action; *let's* is hardly ever used by the boys.

The girls' use of *gonna* (as in (19) below) is another form of mitigated directive, one which makes a suggestion for future action:

(19) *Sharon*: We gonna paint 'em and stuff.

The modal auxiliaries *can* and *could* are also used by the girls to suggest rather than demand action:

(20) *Pam*: We could go around looking for more bottles.

(21) *Sharon*: Hey maybe tomorrow we can come up here and see if they got some more.

Note the use of the adverbial *maybe* in (21) to further soften the directive.

While Goodwin demonstrates convincingly that the girls and boys use quite different linguistic means to express directives when playing in same-sex groups, she stresses that this does not mean that girls are incapable of using more forceful directives in other contexts (such as in cross-sex arguments or when taking on the role of mother while playing house). She argues that the linguistic forms used reflect and at the same time reproduce the social organisation of the group: the boys' group is hierarchically organised, with leaders using very strong directive forms to demonstrate control, while the girls' group is non-hierarchical with all girls participating in decision-making on an equal basis.

Engle's (1980) study of the language of parents when they play with their children revealed that fathers tend to give directions:

(22) Why don't you make a chimney?

(23) Off! Take it off!

Mothers, on the other hand, are more likely to consult the child's wishes:

(24) Do you want to look at any of the other toys over here?

(25) What else shall we put on the truck?

Not only were the fathers more directive than the mothers, they were also more directive with their sons than with their daughters. These linguistic differences again reflect a difference in organisation: mothers view interaction as an occasion to help children learn how to choose; fathers were less concerned with the children's desires and introduced new ideas. Differences in parents' speech to children will be taken up in Chapter 9.

Using Goodwin's definition of aggravated and mitigated directives, West (1998a) looked at the directives used by male and female doctors to their patients. Male doctors preferred to use aggravated forms, such as imperatives:

(26) (a) Lie down
(b) Take off your shoes and socks
(c) Sit for me right there

They also used statements in which they told patients what they 'needed' to do, or what they 'had to' do. Female doctors, on the other hand, preferred more mitigated forms, phrasing their directives as proposals for joint action:

(27) Okay? well let's make that our plan

(28) So let's stay on what we're doing

They also used the pronoun *we* rather than *you* in their directives:

(29) Maybe what we ought to do is, is to stay with the dose . . . you're on

When a woman doctor used the pronoun *you*, the directive was typically mitigated by the addition of modal forms such as *can* or *could*:

(30) and then maybe you can stay away from the desserts and stay away from the food in between meals

The female doctors' mitigated directives are very similar to those used by the girls in Goodwin's Philadelphia study. Just as in example (21), the addition of the adverbial *maybe* in the two examples above softens the force of the directive.

West's discovery that male and female doctors issued directives in very different ways was followed by the discovery that patients reacted differently to these different directives. If the aim of giving a directive is to get someone to do something, then the directives used by women doctors were far more successful than those used by male doctors. Male doctors' bare imperatives (e.g. *lie down*!) elicited compliant responses in 47 per cent of cases, while their statements of patients' needs elicited only 38 per cent compliant responses. As West puts it, 'the more aggravated the directive, the less likely it was to elicit a compliant response' (West 1998a: 349). Female doctors' proposals for joint action (using *let's*) elicited compliant responses in 67 per cent of cases, while suggestions for action (e.g. *you could try taking two every four hours*) had a 75 per cent success rate. Overall, the women doctors used far fewer aggravated directives than the male doctors, and their overall rate of compliant responses was 67 per cent, compared with the male doctors' 50 per cent.

Swearing and taboo language

As we saw in Chapter 2, the folklinguistic belief that men swear more than women and use more taboo words is widespread. Jespersen (1922) claimed (see section 2.3) that women have an 'instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and a preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions'. In his preface to the *Dictionary of American Slang*, Flexner claims that 'most American slang is created and used by males' (Flexner 1960: xii). Lakoff (1975) also claims that men use stronger expletives (*damn*, *shit*) than women (*oh dear*, *goodness*), but her evidence is purely impressionistic.

Kramer (1974) analysed cartoons from the *New Yorker*. She found that cartoonists make their male characters swear much more freely than the female characters. She asked students to identify captions taken from the cartoons as male or female. For most of the captions there was a clear consensus (at least 66 per cent agreement) on the gender of the speaker, and the students commented explicitly on the way in which swearing distinguished male speech from female speech. A second study (Kramer 1975) used cartoons from four different magazines (*New Yorker*, *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*). Students correctly identified the gender of the speaker in 79 per cent of cases. Analysis of the captions showed that, among other things, women used fewer swear words. Both these studies confirm the existence of a cultural stereotype but provide no evidence as to whether or not men actually *do* swear more than women.

More recent sociolinguistic research is beginning to give us a clearer picture of the relationship between gender and swearing. Gomm (1981) recorded fourteen conversations between young British speakers: the participants were all female in five of these, all male in five, and mixed in four. An analysis of the transcripts of these conversations reveals no qualitative difference in the use of swear words, but Table 6.4 shows the difference in frequency between male and female usage. Clearly, the male speakers in Gomm's sample swear more often than the female speakers. Moreover, both women and men swear more in the company of their own sex; male usage of swear words in particular drops dramatically in mixed-sex conversations.

Table 6.4: Incidence of swearing in single-sex and mixed groups (based on Gomm 1981)

	Single-sex groups	Mixed groups	Total
Men	21	4	25
Women	7	2	9

Gomm's findings are supported by a small-scale study reported in Hudson (1992) and also by my own research on conversational narrative (Coates 2003). When men and women tell stories as part of everyday interaction, there are notable differences in their use of taboo language: the stories told in all-male groups contain a great deal of taboo language while the stories told by women

to other women contain virtually none (a grand total of ten tokens of *bloody*, no examples at all of *fuck* or other 'four-letter words'). In mixed contexts, however, male and female speakers seem to accommodate to the perceived norms of the other gender: the narratives produced by male speakers in a mixed context contain far less taboo language than in a single-sex context, while the narratives produced by female speakers in a mixed setting contain far more.

Jenny Cheshire, in her research on adolescent talk in Reading, selected swearing as one of the measures to be included in her Vernacular Culture Index (see section 5.1.2), since 'this was a major symbol of vernacular identity for both boys and girls' (Cheshire 1982: 101). This index was applied only to the boys in her sample (since the girls were said not to have a clearly defined system of cultural values) and there is therefore no comparative data. But Cheshire's claim that swearing has symbolic value for this age group is confirmed by later research on adolescent speech. Young people, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, aim to be 'cool', and coolness includes the use of taboo language. Girls from these backgrounds also aim to subvert traditional gender roles (see, for example, Eder 1993; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995; Pichler 2009a, 2009b), which means that they adopt linguistic strategies traditionally associated with male speakers.

In research on adult conversational practice, there is evidence that female speakers are familiar with – and increasingly ready to use – a wide range of taboo words (De Klerk 1992). Moreover, research which moves the focus to *working-class* women in a deprived inner-city area (Hughes 1992) establishes that such speakers make frequent use of taboo language. As one of Hughes's informants said: 'It's not swearing to us, it's part of our everyday talking.'

So the stereotypes of the tough-talking male and the pure, never-swearing female are false. However, it does seem to be true that swearing is an integral part of contemporary masculinity: 'expletives . . . have become associated with power and masculinity in Western culture' (De Klerk 1997: 147), with the result that using taboo language has a symbolic association with masculinity, not femininity. Intriguing proof of this claim comes from Rusty Barrett's (1999) work on the language of African American drag queens. These are (male) performers who have to produce a convincing feminine speech style while *at the same time* signalling to their audience in some way that the performance is 'false', that they are in fact male. One of the ways they do this is through using taboo language.

Compliments

Research in New Zealand, the United States and Britain suggests that women both give and receive more compliments than men. Holmes (1988a) analysed a corpus of 484 compliment exchanges in New Zealand, and established that 51 per cent of these (248) were given by a woman to another woman, while only 9 per cent (44) were given by a man to another man; 23.1 per cent were

given by a man to a woman, and 16.5 per cent by a woman to a man. This pattern has also been found in comparable American data (Wolfson 1983; Herbert 1998) and in comparable British data (Baptiste 1990).[1]

As Holmes (1995: 127) points out: 'Compliments are remarkably formulaic speech acts. Most draw on . . . a very narrow range of syntactic patterns'. Women and men in Holmes's data use these patterns with similar frequency, apart from 'What (a) ADJ NP!'[2] (e.g. *what lovely earrings!*) which is used much more by women, and the minimal pattern (e.g. *Great shoes!*) which men use significantly more than women. Herbert (1998) also found very high frequency of the 'I really like/love NP' in women's usage, which he explains in part by the sample being skewed to younger rather than older speakers who are native to the USA (where the use of 'I love NP' seems to be more common than in Britain or New Zealand).

Compliments can be analysed in terms of personal focus (Herbert 1998: 56):

1st person focus:	*I like your hair that way*
2nd person focus:	*your hair looks good short*
3rd person focus: [= impersonal]	*nice haircut!*

Herbert found that women preferred more personalised forms (compliments with first or second person focus) while men preferred impersonal (third person) forms. Approximately 60 per cent (290 out of 486) of the male-offered compliments in his corpus were impersonal expressions versus 20 per cent of the female compliments (114 of 576).

The compliments given by women to other women differ both in tone and topic from those given by men to other men. For women in the company of other women, giving and receiving compliments is unremarkable, an everyday occurrence. Women tend to compliment each other on appearance:[3]

(31) [*in college*]
Hi, Joanna, you look nice – your eye make-up is brilliant

(32) [*in the office*]
you've got such lovely eyes

Men, by contrast, prefer to compliment each other on possessions or skill:

(33) [*on top deck of bus, South London*]
Rasclat, man, your boots are wicked, know what I mean?

(34) [*in pub*]
you're very quick with witty one-liners – I would imagine you must have a very high IQ

Men tend to avoid complimenting each other on appearance. As David Britain comments: 'To compliment another man on his hair, his clothes or his body is an *extremely* face-threatening thing to do, both for speaker and hearer. It has to be very carefully done in order not to send out the wrong signals' (Britain,

personal communication, quoted in Holmes 1995: 133), that is, to avoid being seen as gay.

Cross-sex compliments can also be problematic, as the following examples illustrate. In example (35), the man's 'compliment' amounts to sexual harassment:

(35) [*in office*]
you look so sexy today, Faye – I must remember to have a cuddle with you later

Example (36), on the other hand, illustrates male uneasiness with a compliment from a woman:

(36) [*in pub*]
Woman: the thing I really like about you and the thing that makes our relationship into a special kind of friendship above all else is that you're always prepared to listen
Man: pardon? (sarcastic)

In some situations, compliments seem to function as **positive** politeness strategies, that is, they attend to the positive face needs of the addressee. As examples (31) and (32) illustrate, women tend to use compliments as signals of positive politeness. In other situations, however, as illustrated in example (35), compliments can be face-threatening, because they ignore the **negative** face-needs of the addressee. (See section 6.6 for further discussion of the role of face.) Cross-sex compliments are clearly more face-threatening than same-sex compliments, and compliments seem to be more face-threatening to men than to women.

Among English speakers, it is generally agreed that the polite thing to do is to accept a compliment. In practice, however, as the last two examples illustrate, compliments are not always accepted. Pomerantz (1978) argues that this is because compliments place addressees in a difficult position: they have to juggle two conflicting conversational rules: 'Agree with the speaker' and 'Avoid self-praise'. Herbert's (1998) analysis of 1,062 compliments and compliment responses found that only about one-third of responses could be categorised as acceptances. And sometimes acceptances indicated that the addressee was uncomfortable:

(37) Male 1: nice tie
Male 2: [*look of dismay; checks tie*] thankyou

(Herbert 1998: 62)

Where speakers are status equals, responses which are not acceptances are common and include examples like *I bought it for my holiday in France* or *it really knitted itself* or *it's really quite old*. In effect, such responses say, 'I recognise that your compliment was intended to make me feel good; I choose to avoid self-praise and thus assert that we are equal'. However, a surprising finding of Herbert's analysis is that, overall, compliments given by female speakers tended

not to be accepted, whereas compliments given by male speakers, particularly to females, tended to be accepted. This suggests that, all other things being equal, women and men are not seen as status-equals. Where two people are not status-equals, then the expected pattern is that the person with higher status pays the compliments, while the lower status participant accepts such compli-ments. Such an interpretation would explain Holmes's (1988a) finding that higher-status females were almost twice as likely to be complimented as higher-status males. In other words, such women, *because* they are women, end up on the compliment-accepting rather than the compliment-giving side of the equation. Their apparent 'high status' is worth less than that of their male 'peers'.

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