

Cameron Fowler
Dr. Sinae Lee
English 5380.001
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Cursing Sisters: A Discourse Analysis on Shedding Gendered Stereotypes Concerning Taboo

Language in Women's Speech

Throughout history women's speech (WS) has been characterized as soft and delicate, and "to be more polite, more correct, and to aim for more standard forms than men." (Hughes 1992). Women who do deviate from linguistic stereotypes are often seen as less than and uncouth (Haas 1979). This notion of ladylike speech has been and continues to be used as a function "of social control" (Hughes 1992). Men on the other hand are afforded more flexibility in their speech without much fear of being seen as less than (Lakoff 1973). From the beginning of sociolinguistics and well into the modern age these stereotypes have persisted and dominated popular discourse. As Hughes (1992) states "In sociolinguistics, much is made of the difference between female and male speech." (292). One such popular stereotype is that (respectable and normal) women do not use "taboo" language (de Klerk 1992). But as de Klerk (1990) has found in their study titled *Slang: A male domain?* de Klerk shows that trends are moving more towards slang (and by extension cursing) being used by more and more women than in the past. As society moves away from a more prohibitive patriarchal structure women are able to adopt more "masculine" speech. This then creates a need to recognize "that comfortable theories about "nice," nonswearing females are long overdue for reconsideration." (de Klerk 1992). Like many of the linguists mentioned previously, this discourse analysis will examine the breaking of various gendered stereotypes in language, such as the one mentioned previously as well as the use of slang and "name calling" between the two participants.

Much like Lackoff (1973) a large portion of the analysis in this paper will be based on introspective reasoning and observations. The participants, myself and my younger sister, which will henceforth be referred to as Speaker 1 (S1) and Speaker 2 (S2) are sisters who were raised upper-middle class in the Texas hill country by both of their birth parents (who are, and have only ever been, married to each other), but are now middle-middle class and living together in south Texas. The two participants were raised to not use taboo language but have since adopted taboo language in young adulthood to fit in with their peers. S1 is a graduate student currently enrolled in a sociolinguistics class and S2 is an undergraduate at the same university but is not enrolled in a sociolinguistics class. The reason for my mentioning of the participants' upbringing in contrast to their current (at the time of the recording) state of being is because intersectionality matters when analyzing the linguistic behaviors of people as these factors play a role in how individuals are shaped and act (Kirkham 2015). The excerpts in this paper are taken from a September 23, 2022 recording during a three hour drive from south Texas to the hill country to visit their parents.

The following excerpt, *Pay Attention to Me*, is taken from a transcription of the recording in which S2 is driving and S1 is discussing what she has learned in school and S2 interrupts with a quip about other drivers on the road.

1	S1:	But yeah so like I guess the mark of a good storyteller is like
2		details and then some of the things about storytelling whenever
3		its verbally through communication
4		-----
5	S2:	[yeah]
6	S1:	[and] (x) and linguistics um (#) is that like (0.1) you
7		ch[ange-]
8	S2:	[(this)] IS HOW YOU pass on the left hand- sorry h h
9		-----
10	S1:	[DA]MN I GUESS I'm not [important]
11	S2:	[you] [I'm sor]ry no it's I'm paying
12		attention to driving anyways (#) continue and then I'll tell-
13		nevermind
14		continue h I love you
15		-----

16 S1: ((jokingly)) whore= =huh-he-he-he anyways um
 17 S2: ((jokingly)) =slut=
 18 -----
 19 S1: pay attention to me that'sso rude= =that'sso rude
 20 S2: =I'm=
 21 -----

This excerpt breaks WS stereotypes in several ways. First in lines 10, 16, and 17 S1 and S2 use various “taboo” words such as “[DA]MN” (line 10), “whore=” (line 16), and “=slut=” (line 17). The use of the taboo word in line 10 is used to grab the attention of S2 and regain control of the conversation. Normally this would be seen as male behavior like in Coates (1997) where men not only take turns in conversation, but also have different strategies to regain control over conversation. Women, on the other hand, are often seen to be more collaborative in their conversations, with much overlap and contributive noises (Coates 1989). In contrast to this, lines 16 and 17 are used as a means to build comradery through the use of taboo language with a taboo way of using these words (taboo in terms of WS stereotypes). Men will typically use this form of speech to also build comradery (Cameron 1997). Thus lines 10, 16, and 17 are an example of the participants subverting WS stereotypes by adopting more men’s speech (MS) patterns.

In the excerpt, *Tiktok*, the participants are discussing a research project for a class that S1 is taking. They discuss how the popular social media platform Tiktok is a good resource for sociolinguistics studies.

53 S1: you know sociolinguistics right= =tiktok=
 54 S2: =yeah= =TIKTOK
 55 -----
 56 S1: is a fucking goldmine [for this] field
 57 S2: [I figured (xxxx)]
 58 -----
 59 S2: there’s so much conten[t]
 60 S1: [it’s a] fucking goldmine I swear to
 61 go[d] (.) so (0.1) my first project for this class
 62 S2: [uh-huh]
 63 -----

Again we see the use of expletives (taboo words) in casual conversation. In this particular instance however the use of the word “fucking” in lines 56 and 60 is to indicate excitement and

garner a reaction from S2. This casual use of the expletive goes against current stereotypes that women do not use “impolite” words, however it does display agreement in the sentiments that “women's exclamations are likely to convey enthusiasm” (Kramer 1974), whereas men use such words as a way to express “when they are angry or exasperated” (Kramer 1974). In addition to this the use of “I swear to god” in lines 60 and 61 indicates a form of “strong” sentiments which in the past have been deemed as too masculine for women to use in WS, as seen in Lakoff (1973) when she discusses and highlights the differences between WS and MS.

In the excerpt *This Would Not Fly*, S2 is discussing with her classmates about family and how parents raised them as children. More specifically S2 is relaying how a lot of the parent styles her classmates previously talked about would not be okay to do by today’s parenting standards.

101	S2:	um ((said laughingly)) so @@ we were just talking about like
102		our relationship with our parents and how we love them but like
103		there were some things that they did
104		-----
105	S1:	yea[h]
106	S2:	[we were] just like huh if I was born in today’s age and
107		-----
108	S2:	growing up in today’s [age]
109	S1:	[@@@] [yep]
110	S2:	[as a ki]d this would not fly=
111	S1:	=no absolutely [not]
112	S2:	[no]

S2 is demonstrating the use of slang in line 110 with “this would not fly” here the key phrase is “not fly” which is popular American slang (in most regions of the United States) for something being unacceptable, usually in reference to behavior. As de Klerk states in her paper *Slang: A Male Domain?* (1990) “The stereotype of males as slang-users, females as slang eschewers is supported in all serious linguistic writings on the topic” (5). However, de Klerk (1990) also mentions that slang is used with the purpose “to show a shared linguistic code, shared knowledge and interests - in other words to reinforce group membership” (6), which is similar to how the

phrase “not fly” is used in this context as it is well known between both speakers. Regardless of the usefulness of slang between S2 and S1, the fact remains that it is not how women should speak according to current gendered stereotypes.

Though this discourse analysis paper covers a short conversation with only two speakers, it is indicative of a change in the use of taboo language in women as both speakers are typical of other women in their demographic. Both with the use of expletives and the use of slang the speakers demonstrate a melding of WS and MS in casual conversation. Despite sociolinguistics having emphasized and reinforced gendered stereotypes in language there have been many linguists in the last twenty years that recognize the need to shed such assumptions about language and gender, opting for a more objective look into “standards” deviation both in gender-specific contexts and general language as a whole, as was done in this discourse analysis. There also is a greater need to study social taboos in language and how these taboos are exhibited and used by various genders. And though the tide is turning in the greater conversation surrounding taboo language and gender (such as Cameron, de Klerk, Haas, Hughes, and Kirkham) there needs to be more study with the intent to examine and possibly challenge gendered stereotypes concerning taboo language, especially as culture changes and moves away from these stereotypes.

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