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<div align="center">Subverting Gendered Language Expectations: A Look at My Mother</div>

When I realized that I would need to record willing participants for my LING 470

homework, I immediately turned to my family for human volunteers. My mother was one of my

first choices. At the same time, both in LING 470 and in LING 302, I was learning about

different sociolinguistic theories that discuss ideas of gender and language. Throughout my

research for this class, I was continually struck by how my mother exhibited unusual speech

patterns that seemed to go against typical gender expectations for women's speech. Most of the

sources I read suggested that women were naturally shy, passive, or meek speakers, and that

competition, assertiveness, and conversation domination were all associated with men. I knew

instantly that that did not seem right to me. As I continued to record my mother for other

assignments, I saw more and more how she demonstrated linguistic features that did not conform

to what my textbooks described as "women's language." My goal for this paper is to further

explore my mother's speech style and analyze whether or not she conforms to or defies gender

expectations. Likely, I will find that she adheres to some expectations, yet challenges others. The

insight that my research provides is challenging gender stereotypes and conventions and I hope

to present an alternative for women's speech that is not characterized by politeness, submission,

any other negative traits that are often associated with women's speech. I will primarily focus on

a few key linguistic features, including interruptions, gap times, joint production, and turn-taking in order to make my claims.

      My data is in the form of recorded conversations between my mother and sisters, and one conversation between my mother and father. In order to prompt a natural conversation, I started each recording by asking my participants to tell me a story. The stories they selected, and the distracted rabbit trails they went down in the process, were entirely their own choice. I have several data sample sets that each span between one to two minutes in length, although those clips are pulled from thirty to sixty minute recordings. I collected some of this data in person through observation, and some of my data was recorded from phone calls that took place between my participants. The data varies between joint narratives of my mother and sister or mother and father telling stories to casual conversations between both parties. In all of my sample sets, my participants were in comfortable, intimate settings in which only family members were present. I wanted to structure these situations to be as low-stress and normal as possible, in order to prevent my participants from altering their speech in any way, but that unfortunately limited my data slightly because I was not able to record clips of my mother speaking to non-family members. Because of this, I was not able to draw conclusive findings on the difference between inter-family and non-inter-family conversations. I told my mother that I was writing about her, but I did not tell her what features I was looking for until after all of my recordings were finished, so that I would not have an issue with acquiescence bias. In every recording, she behaved exactly as I predicted that she would, and I had no problem collecting the sort of data that I needed for this project.

In order to best understand how my mother challenges conventions of women's language, it is first necessary to define what most linguists consider to be features of women's language. A lot of stereotypes surrounding women's speech are centered around politeness. Women are often conditioned to appear hyper-polite in order to adhere to antiquated ideas of femininity, so features like hedges, fillers, indirect requests, or tag questions are all included in women's language. Additionally, women have frequently been shown to interrupt far less than men. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* says that in one study, researchers found that men committed up to 96% of all interruptions in mixed gender conversations.Following an interruption from either a man or a woman, women made a retrieval (picking up where they left off before the interruption) about one third of the time (Holmes & Wilson 333). Other features of women's language include intensifiers like "just" or "so," increased use of adjectives, emphatic stress, and HRT. Traditionally, intensifiers are seen as empty words that pad sentences without adding any real meaning, which has led many scholars to associate them with uncertainty or confusion about the conversation at hand. HRT is one of the most famous features of women's language, and it is often seen as being audibly grating or annoying.

Additionally there are two speaking styles that gather a lot of attention from linguists: high-involvement and high-considerateness. According to Deborah Tannen, men are typically seen as more high-considerateness, and women are typically seen as more high-involvement. Sherry L. Beaumont defines these concepts as such:

> 'high involvement' style [is] characterized by a faster rate of speech, faster
> turn-taking, an avoidance of inter turn pauses, and cooperative overlaps (i.e., two

speakers talking at the same time)... 'high considerateness' style [means] speakers

talked more slowly and had slower turn-taking and longer pauses between turns

(Beaumont 6).

This might seem to contradict the expectations of women's language that I have previously

explicated, but a closer examination of these concepts shows that they reinforce those

stereotypes. The cooperative overlaps discussed in the high-involvement style do not refer to

interruptions, but instead, to examples of simultaneous speech without either speaker attempting

to regain control of the floor. If men adhere to the high-considerateness style, it means that they

approach turn-taking in a more stilted, less naturally flowing way. Although they use

interruptions to compete for the main speaking position, they are - in theory - less likely to use

simultaneous speech as a means of joint production or verbal encouragement. However, these are

all generalizations that are heavily gendered, and the reason why my mother is so interesting

linguistically to me is the way she thwarts some of these generalizations.

Interruptions In All-Female Conversations

The first way that my mother defies expectations of women's language is her decreased

attention to 'super polite' forms of speech. This is especially noticeable through her use of

interruptions. In a one minute clip lifted from the middle of a conversation between my mother

and sister, my mother (M) interrupted six times as compared to my sister's (S) three times.

Additionally, my mother latched on to a previous utterance nine times as compared to my sister's

three times. This shows an eagerness to talk and might suggest that my mother values her input

into the narrative more than my sister's, which violates politeness rules. My mother interrupted

twice as often as my sister and latched three times as often as she did.An example of her

interrupting looks like this:

Example 1

```
1    Mother (M): Hannah tells each person (.9) [how]
2    Sister (S):                              [how] many
3            people in [front of them have paid for the
4            person behind them,]
6    M:      [right so like she's saying so like so]
7            four people in a row have done this you
8            know she tells to the fifth person and
9            five people in a row.
```

In this transcript, my sister interrupts my mother in line 2 in order to finish the train of thought

and narrative sequence herself. However, my mother interjects back in in line 6. Her words in

brackets in line 6 are filler words, and she does not continue telling the story until line 7, when

she introduces new information. Because of this, it seems like her phrase in line 6 was intended

merely to input her own voice until my sister stopped talking. The brackets in lines 4 through 6

contain simultaneous speech, so it is clear that my mother did not introduce the new information

in line 7 until my sister fell silent, and my mother had the proverbial floor again. This shows

boldness on my mother's part, because she intentionally verbally battled for the primary

speaking position, and she obtained it. A speaker more concerned with politeness rules may not

have been as deliberate in using an interruption to regain verbal dominance.This demonstrates a

resistance to the stereotypically feminine high-involvement speaking style, because although my

mother and sister spoke quickly, latched frequently, and changed turns rapidly, my mother

refrained from using simultaneous speech, and instead intentionally used an interruption until she

was the sole speaker again.

Interruptions are seemingly my mother's preferred method of gaining control over the

floor. Here is another example of an interruption:

Example 2

```
1    M:   it's interesting that they've woven in (.6) it'd
be
2         like (.4) you know (.) like (.) talking about (.3)
3         string theory? (.4) and::: using that?=
4    Me:  =[he's obsessed with <creak> string theory
5         </creak>]
6    M:   [and structuring it as something that's current]
7         and cutting edge (.) and they're using it (.4) so
8         (.7) it's fun <creak> scientifically </creak>
```

In this moment, I attempt to interrupt in line 4, but the latching symbols indicate that there is

virtually no pause in her narrative due to my attempt at an interruption.Her speech between lines

3 and 6 occurs fluidly and without hesitation. This shows that my mother was unwilling to give

up the floor, and instead, continued to speak until I gave up and relinquished control of the

conversation. This is not a retrieval, which is characteristic of women's language, because in

order for a retrieval to occur, there must be a successful interruption.Because she continued

speaking normally, then, lines 3 and 6 demonstrate a careful mastery over the dialogue in

question. In these lines she not only shows a willingness to compete for the floor, which is more

characteristic of men's language, but she also shows a casual disregard for 'super polite' rules of

turn-taking. I interrupted her, and whereas another woman may have allowed me to continue and

then made a retrieval, my mother just kept talking. This may be a violation of politeness rules,

but it helped her finish her thought quickly and succinctly, which helped the conversation move

forward.In this way, the rules of politeness would have hindered the conversation from

continuing.

Interruptions In Mixed Gender Conversations

The previous two examples are both taken from female-only conversations, in which my

mother has the position of power anyway because of her age and relationship to me and my

sister. However, she still displays the same assertiveness in mixed gender conversations. This is

a transcription from a conversation between her and my father:

Example 3

```
1    Father (F): we were all very upse::t=
2    M:          =shocked and appalled=
3    F:          =and- [xx]
4    M:               [be]cause these were no::t (.7) <H>
5                some of these people were animal science
6                majors? </H> before they went to vet
7                school
```

In this example, my mother and father are jointly telling a story to me.My father was the person

present at the time of the event in question, but my mother is familiar with the story. Even

though my mother was not directly affected by this situation, she still cuts my father off in line 4

and tells the story herself.She interjects in line 2, but my father continues on without much

hesitation, as demonstrated by the latching. However, even though my mother pauses for almost

a full second, my father does not attempt to speak again, because she effectively won the floor

from him. This is unusual because of the mixed gender dynamic. According to the research

presented by Holmes and Wilson several paragraphs above, in a conversation between a man and

a woman, there is every reason to believe that the man will commit far more interruptions than the woman, and yet, in this instance, my mother shows this to be simply not true. Furthermore, my father seems unbothered by the interruption, suggesting that there is nothing inherently threatening to his masculinity about my mother's verbal assertiveness.

<u>Using Women's Language</u>

So far, I have argued that my mother showcases an unusual ease regarding being assertive and dominant in conversations, which is not typically associated with women's speech. However, my intention is not to argue that my mother uses a masculine speech style, but rather, that she uses typically gendered features associated with both men and women interchangeably, and that her speech functions in a unique way that transcends the existing literature surrounding discourse analysis that I have been able to find.My mother does indeed use linguistic features that are commonly associated with women, and she does so with the same tenacity that she uses interruptions.In order to demonstrate this, I refer back to the conversation from Example I between my mother and sister.

<u>Example 4</u>

```
1   S:   I'm- I'm getting progressively more and more like
2   M:   (.5) excited=
3   S:   =!buoyant! I'm like jumping up and down and
4        they're getting really excited coz as the number
5        goes up they're like <H> you're crazy five people
6        d- I wanna do it too </H>and this guy is just
7        like (.) uh cool (.) and <H> leaves </H>=
8   M:   =and takes his [food]
9   H:                  [@@@@]
```

This is an example of joint production in a female only conversation. My mother's comment in line 2 is not intended to overpower my sister, but rather, is intended to help her. The 0.5 second pause between lines 1 and 2 show that my mother said "excited" in order to fill the pause left by my sister, who seemed to be searching for the right word. When my sister responded a moment later with "buoyant," my mother did not attempt to continue speaking, but instead allowed my sister to finish her thought. This type of verbal encouragement helped allow my sister to say lines 3-7, which is a long statement for her compared to the rest of her lines from the entire piece of data. This is by far her longest statement in the original transcription, which may be due in part to my mother's assistance. In line 8, instead of interrupting, my mother merely adds another piece of information to the story that my sister did not include. Line 8 is intended to enhance and expand on the story being told, and is not an act of assertion. Line 9 shows that my sister did not feel interrupted or affronted, and did not have anything else to add, because she laughs instead of continuing the story. Because of her laughter, I surmise that line 8 was a true example of joint production, and that my mother supplemented the story instead of taking it over.

Earlier, I discussed how many scholars view an excess of words like "just" or "like" to also be features of women's language, and how they are examples of "empty" language. Here is an example of my mother using intensifiers:

Example 5

```
       1   S:   he didn't even [ask]
       2   M:               [no] (.3) no he was just like=
       3   S:   =everything would have been fine if he had just
       4        decided to be a good person
       5   M:   no but i-that's just it was just so funny like
(.)    6        thanks (.5) by:::e
```

My mother uses intensifiers in lines 2 and 5. She repeats just and like multiple times during this portion of the narrative. This is interesting to me linguistically because rather than displaying uncertainty, it seems to me as though the intensifiers are operating in some way as a function of the storytelling. My mother clearly thinks the story is funny, and her repetition of words in line 5 suggests that she is drawing attention to the humor in the story by being so caught up in the comedy of the moment that she is unable to organize her thoughts. She uses "just" and "like" in order to emphasize the joke that has been made, not to show confusion or ambiguity. This shows that features commonly associated with women's language can be used in a variety of ways, to express a variety of motives, feelings, and intentions, and that grouping linguistic features into gendered categories can lead to overlooking the true meaning of certain moments within a discourse.

After I started this class and began learning about theory and strategies involved in discourse analysis, it did not take long for me to realize that my mother is a determined, emphatic, self-assured speaker. The first time I sat down to transcribe a section of data involving her, it became clear that not only does she tend to hold the floor in conversations, but that she fluidly cuts in and out of other speakers whenever she desires, usually speaks more frequently or for longer stretches without being challenged by another speaker, and demonstrates many verbal features that are not often associated with women's speech. And yet, I do not believe that my mother talks "like a man." Although I found the discussion of women's language that I could find in this semester's textbooks to be incredibly interesting, I was frustrated with how limited it

seemed. Grouping the kaleidoscope of human communication into a gender binary seems

disrespectful to the plethora of unique, individual ways that people can choose to express

themselves. My goal in conducting this research and writing this paper was to show that not all

women speak the same way, and although there might be similarities among the majority of

women, there will always be enough significant outliers to warrant believing in concepts like

"women's language" with a measure of prudence and caution. My research surrounding my

mother was intended to help me more fully understand why she speaks the way she does, and

how her speech acts function to help her maintain the kind of verbal and dialogic authority that

she does. I expected to find that she would adhere to some rules of women's language and

subvert other rules. I ended up being correct. I found that across the board, my mother uses

interruptions, interjections, and aggressive linguistic strategies to control narrative and

conversational sequences. In every recording I have of her, she interrupts more people and more

frequently than any other speaker involved. This is true regardless of the age or gender of the

other speakers. Unfortunately, I do not have data of her speaking with non-relatives, so I only

have anecdotal evidence to support my claim that she speaks this way regardless of whether she

is related to the other speaker or not, but her conversations with me, my sisters, and my father all

demonstrate a clever, intentional method of having power in a conversation. This is completely

uncharacteristic of women's speech according to popular scholarly discourse. This alone shows

that it is dangerous to lump all women into one category or style of speaking. However, I did

find that my mother used other features of women's language like joint production and

intensifiers. She readily supplied encouragement and helped participate in storytelling when

needed, and she used emphatic stress and intensifiers to help make her speech sound more

audibly pleasing and to help keep her listeners engaged. So although she may have been using features of women's language, they were not designed to show uncertainty, like many linguists have suggested in the past. Instead, they showcase a multiplex of linguistic tendencies that help make my mother a diverse, interesting speaker. She readily switched back and forth from features like interruptions to features like joint production, demonstrating an ease with multiple speaking styles that I find akin to code switching between "men's" and "women's" speech. I hope that in the future, linguists are able to expand more fully on the ideas of gendered language practices and create a more inclusive, more complex body of research that allows speakers to express themselves in a variety of ways without heavily gendered expectations.

References

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