

# Gender Differences in the Use of Linguistic Forms in the Speech of Men and Women: A Comparative Study of Persian and English

**Azadeh Nemati**

*Jahrom Azad University, Iran*

**Jennifer Marie Bayer**

*Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, India*

## **Abstract**

This research was intended to determine whether men and women were different with respect to the use of intensifiers, hedges and tag questions in English and Persian. To conduct the study, R. Lakoff's (1975) ideas concerning linguistic differences between males and females were taken into account. In order to gather the most natural-like data, 6 English and 8 Persian film-scripts with a family and social theme were randomly selected from amongst all the scenarios available in two libraries of the University of Shiraz. In all, 9,280 utterances were studied. The data were then divided into four major groups: (1) cross gender, same culture, (2) same gender, cross culture; (3) cross gender, cross culture; and (4) cross culture data. The results of the 21 Chi-squares computed showed no significant difference between the groups on the use of intensifiers, hedged and tag questions. The findings of the study did not confirm Lakoff's opinion regarding gender-bound language at least in the three areas and the corpus inspected in this research.

## **Keywords:**

Linguistics, Gender-Bound Language, Gender Differences, Hedge, Tag Question, Intensifier, Persian, English, Difference Theory, Dominance Theory.

## **Abstracto**

*Esta investigación se llevó a cabo con la intención de determinar si los hombres y las mujeres son diferentes con relación al uso de intensificadores, setos y preguntas coletilla en inglés y persa. Para realizar la misma, se tomaron en cuenta las ideas de R. Lakoff (1975) sobre las diferencias lingüísticas de género entre mujeres y hombres. Para lograr obtener una data lo más cercana a la realidad, se utilizaron como muestra 6 guiones de filme en inglés y 8 en persa, todos con una temática familiar y social y escogidos al azar entre dos bibliotecas de la Universidad de Shiraz. Se estudiaron 9,280 palabras y sonidos en todas y los resultados obtenidos se dividieron en cuatro grupos principales: (1) diferente género, (2) mismo género, diferente cultura; (3) diferente género y cultura, y, (4) diferente cultura. Los resultados de 21 cuadrados de Chi no mostraron ninguna diferencia significativa entre los grupos de acuerdo al uso de intensificadores, setos y preguntas de coletilla. Los hallazgos del estudio no confirmaron la opinión de Lakoff sobre el vínculo entre género y lenguaje, al menos en las tres áreas que se investigaron y el corpus que se utilizó en la investigación.*

***Palabras clave:***

*lingüística, lenguaje vinculado al género, diferencias de género, seto, pregunta de coletilla, intensificador, perso, inglés, Teoría de diferencia, Teoría de predominio.*

**Dr. Jennifer Marie Bayer**, is a Reader-Cum-Officer, at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), in Mysore, India. Her research interests are Language studies, TEFL, TESL, Sociolinguistics, etc.

**Azadeh Nemati**, is a member of the English Faculty at Jahrom Azad University, in Iran; she is a Ph.D. Candidate, at the Dep. of Studies in Linguistics, University of Mysore, India. Her research interests are Language acquisition and learning, TEFL, TESL, Sociolinguistics, gender studies.

**Introduction**

From childhood males and females are different in many ways, both physiologically and psychologically. Eisenmen (1997) claims that women, in comparison to men, have better memory. Men are quite accurate in maintaining a sense of direction but women are not. This is consistent with the claim that men tend to do better than women on visual-spatial tests and in mathematics.

There are also social differences between men and women. Two of the most significant theories on social differences between males and females are “*difference theory*” and “*dominance theory*”. According to the “*difference theory*” men and women, even those within the same group, live in different or separate cultural worlds and, as a result, they promote different ways of speaking (Uchida, 1992). This theory is sometimes called “*two-culture theory*”. In simple terms, although men and women live in the same environment they establish different relations with society as if each belonged to a different environment and culture, the result of which is consequently reflected in the language of both genders as in

other aspects of their lives. So in this theory, cross-gender communication is to be taken as cross-cultural or bi-cultural communication.

In “dominance theory”, men and women are believed to inhabit a cultural and linguistic world, where power and status are unequally distributed. In this theory, also called *power-based theory*, the focus is on male dominance and gender division.

### ***Gender-bound Language***

Although men and women, from a given social class, belong to the same speech community, they may use different linguistic forms. The linguistic forms used by women and men contrast to some extent in all speech communities. For example, Holmes (1993) mentions the Amazon Indians’ language as an extreme example, where the language used by a child’s mother is different from that used by her father and each tribe is distinguished by a different language. In this community, males and females speak different languages.

Less dramatic are communities where men and women speak the same language, but some distinct linguistic features occur in the speech of women and men. These differences range from pronunciation or morphology to vocabulary. Holmes (1993) refers to Japanese, where different words, with the same meaning, are used distinctively by men and women. For example, in this language when a woman wants to say ‘*water*’, she uses the word ‘*ohiya*’ whereas a man uses the word ‘*miza*’.

Furthermore, women tend to use the standard language more than men do. Climate (1997) believes that females generally use speech to develop and maintain relationships. They use language to achieve intimacy. Tannen (1990) states that women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence. Tannen (ibid) also states that such a communication resembles cross-cultural

communication where the style of communication is different. According to Kaplan and Farrell (1994) and Leet-Peregrini (1980) messages (e-mails) produced by women are short and their participation is driven by their desire to keep the communication going rather than the desire to achieve consensus.

### *A Brief Review of Works on Gender-Bound Language*

The investigation and identification of differences between men's and women's speech date back across time. Until 1944, no specific piece of writing on gender differences in language was published. As stated by Grey (1998), it was in the 1970s that comparison between female cooperativeness and male competitiveness in linguistic behavior began to be noticed. Mulac, et al., (2001) concentrated on the term 'gender as culture' and ran an empirical study on linguistic differences between men and women. Swallowe (2003) reviewed the literature on differences between men and women in the use of media for interpersonal communication, etc.

From among these researchers, Lakoff (1975) proposed theories on the existence of women's language. Her book '*Language and Woman's Place*' has served as a basis for much research on the subject. She mentions ten features for women's language. As cited in Holmes (1993, p. 314), these ten features are as follows:

1. Lexical hedges or fillers, *e.g. you know, sort of, ...*
2. Tag questions, *e.g. she is very nice, isn't she?*
3. Rising intonation on declaratives, *e.g. it's really good.*
4. Empty adjectives, *e.g. divine, charming, cute.*
5. Precise color terms, *e.g. magenta, acqamarine.*
6. Intensifiers such as *just* and *so*.
7. Hypercorrect grammar, *e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms.*
8. Superpolite forms, *e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms.*
9. Avoidance of strong swear words, *e.g. fudge, my goodness.*
10. Emphatic stress, *e.g. it was a BRILLIANT performance.*

Lakoff's hypotheses have both pros and cons. Men's language as put by Lakoff is assertive, adult, and direct, while women's language is immature, hyper-formal or hyper-polite and non-assertive. But such statements have their own pros. Michaelson and Poll (2001), for example, emphasized on the dynamic nature of speech of men and women by stating that 'rule of politeness' governing face-to-face conversations seems to be less binding when there is no physical presence. They also state that it is this bodily presence of conversational dyads that lead to a weakening of gender roles. While analyzing the electronic mails of a number of men and women, Bunz and Campbell (2002) stated that social categories such as age, gender, etc. do not influence politeness accommodation in e-mail. Canary and Hause (1993) as cited in Mulac (1998) have argued that meaningful differences in the communication strategies of men and women have not been found with any degree of consistency.

Despite such and many other similar observations, Lakoff believes that the use of tag questions by women is the sign of uncertainty. Dubois and Crouch (1975) launched a critique on Lakoff's claims, especially on tag questions. They examined the use of tag questions within the context of a professional meeting and concluded that at least in that context males used tag questions more than females did. Their conclusion was that Lakoff's hypothesis might be biased in favor of highly stereotyping beliefs or folk linguistics.

Dubois and Crouch (1975) questioned Lakoff's findings as Lakoff had used introspective methods in her study. They argued that her conclusions were made on uncontrolled and unverifiable observation of others and were based on a highly skewed and non-random sample of people.

To examine Lakoff's hypothesis, the researchers selected three grammatical categories, from the above list, namely tag questions, hedges and intensifiers as the basis of

analysis. The following research question was the basis for this study. *Do women use intensifiers, tag questions and hedges more than men do in English and Persian?* This research question gave way to three null hypotheses as follows:

(1) *There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of hedges.*

(2) *There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of intensifiers.*

(3) *There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of tag questions.*

### ***Data for the Study***

To carry out the investigation, the researchers made use of the following English film scenarios: (1) Out of Sight, (2) Taxi Driver, (3) American Beauty, (4) China Town, (5) My Beautiful Launderette and (6) Blood Simple. The Persian film scenarios used were as follows: (1) æz kærxe tɑ: rɑIn (From Karkheh to Rine), (2) si:b (The Apple), (3) bætfɛhɑ:ye ɑ:semɑ:n (Children of the Heaven), (4) edʒɑ:re nefɪnhɑ: (The Tenents), (5) otobu:s (The Bus), (6) nu:n o goldu:n (Bread and vase), (7) æru:si-ye xu:bɑ:n (The Wedding of the Nice People) and (8) ʃæbe sæmu:r (The Sable's Night). Each scenario selected had a social and family theme. The researchers made use of scenarios in print so as to get to results, which could closely represent the linguistic performance of ordinary people in natural situations. In their study, they believed that data extracted from scenarios were very close, if not exactly the same, to natural data.

Poems were not used, since they were considered to be quite different from the ordinary language especially with respect to structure and sequences of elements.

The above-mentioned scenarios were selected in the following way: First, all the Persian scenarios, with a family and social theme, were listed. They were available in Mirza-ye Shirazi Library as well as in the Regional Library of Science and Technology ([www.rlst.ac.ir](http://www.rlst.ac.ir)) both located in Shiraz, Iran. Then, eight Persian scenarios were randomly selected. The same steps were taken to select the six English film scenarios. Care was also taken to select those English scenarios with themes quite close to or equivalent with those of the Persian scenarios. For example, the theme of writing in '*Taxi Driver*' and '*otobu:s*' are very similar, if not exactly the same. To control the length of the documents, an unequal number of scenarios (eight versus six) were selected and used throughout the study. Moreover, in order to make the study as reliable as possible two tests of reliability, namely inter-rater and intra-rater reliability were used.

To mark each example of hedges, tag questions and intensifiers, the researchers recapitulated each utterance and jointly decided if an example of hedge, tag question or intensifier had been observed. The result was a single and unique rating representing the joint judgment of both researchers. Whenever the two researchers disagreed on marking a single linguistic form as an example of a tag question, hedge or intensifier, they discussed the issue with each other once again and ultimately decided on the appropriateness of a single category. All such cases were resolved in this manner. To calculate the intra-rater reliability, the same steps were taken once again by the researchers, after an interval of one month, resulting in a second list of markings. Then, the correlation coefficients between the two lists were calculated (0.83%), and thus the two lists and markings were highly correlated. To check inter-rater reliability, the researchers gave the whole data to a linguist who was well informed about the topic under study. He was asked to mark each occurrence of hedge, tag question and intensifier in the whole scenarios. The result of the correlation coefficients

between the list he produced and the one produced by the researchers revealed once again a high correlation between the two lists (85%).

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

To collect the relevant data, the investigators first read all the Persian and English scenarios with great care (The researchers used the written books and did not watch the movies for the ease of analysis). Then, the total number of utterances in each book was counted. Later, the utterances were divided into two parts, those produced by females and those produced by males. This data is summarized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Frequency of Intensifiers, Hedges and Tags as produced in English and Persian scenarios by Males and Females.**

English scenarios		Persian scenarios		
	Males (U=2827)	Females (U=1306)	Males (U=3781)	Females (U=1366)
I	110 (3.89%)	78 (5.97%)	110 (2.9%)	74 (5.4%)
H	150 (5.3%)	77 (5.89%)	72 (1.9%)	68 (4.9%)
T	44 (1.55%)	8 (0.61%)	9 (0.23%)	9 (0.65%)

I= Intensifier, H= Hedge, T= Tag, U= Utterance

In this study, utterance was used as the unit of speech, since there were quite a number of cases in Persian scenarios where a sentence did not end in a full stop but in a comma. Or, where two or three sentences were combined using a conjunction like ‘and’. Furthermore, the definition of sentence was quite vague and, thus, not suitable for doing a comparative study between two languages. For these reasons, the researchers considered ‘utterance’ to be a better device to pursue a comparative study. In fact, utterance has a clear cut definition referring to the whole linguistic production of each person, in a conversation, in each turn, be it a single sound, a word, phrase, sentence, or even a series of sentences. In



simple speaking, there are at least two persons in each conversation who take their turns as speakers and listeners. All the linguistic production of each person in each turn is considered as a single utterance (For example, in the extraction, Jack: *How are you John?* John: *Fine, thanks.* There are two utterances which have been italicized for ease of identification.).

### ***Scope of the Study***

Lakoff (1975) had put forward ten elements showing lack of confidence and tentativeness in the speech of women. Some of these items were related to the domain of phonetics such as rising and falling intonation. Collecting data concerning pitch and intonation as well as a discussion of hypercorrect grammar and super polite forms were not only difficult to handle but also of little significance given the research question stated by the researchers.

What the researchers had first in mind was to include swear words as well. But, this category was taken out from the final analysis since the use made by people of these words was dependent on many variables, such as the status of the speaker, the status of the listener, their gender, etc. If swear words were included in this study, a large number of other factors had to be controlled which was beyond the scope of the present study.

It was planned to look for empty adjectives as well but unfortunately not a single example of this was found in the total corpus. For this reason, the researchers excluded the discussion of this category as well as that of the swear words. This left them with three grammatical categories namely, ‘tag questions’, ‘hedges’ and ‘intensifiers’, which were used by the researchers as the basis for analysis.

### ***Data Analysis***

To analyze the data in this study, the researchers made use of frequency counts and Chi-square statistical procedures. Frequency counts were used to show the frequency of ‘intensifiers’, ‘hedges’, and ‘tag questions’ as found in the English and Persian utterances produced by males and females.

Also, the researchers took advantage of percentage figures to show the distribution of each linguistic item within and between groups. Finally, Chi-square was used to find out whether or not the differences were meaningful and significant.

### ***Findings and Results***

Results of analysis of data will be presented in four parts. In the first part, comparisons are made between cross gender, same culture data, i.e. between males and females in Persian scenarios as well as males and females in English scenarios. The second part deals with same gender, cross culture data. Here, comparisons are made between: (1) males in English and Persian scenarios or (2) females in English and Persian scenarios. Later, cross gender, cross culture data will be dealt with. In this part, comparisons are made between males in English scenarios and females in Persian scenarios and the other way around, i.e. females in English scenarios and males in Persian scenarios, and finally in the fourth part comparisons are made between the whole characters (both genders) in English scenarios and the whole characters (both genders) in Persian scenarios with respect to the use of intensifiers, tag questions and hedges.

### ***Statistics on Cross Gender, Same Culture Data***

Table 2 summarizes the results of six comparisons made regarding males and females in English scenarios (the left side of the table) as well as males and females in Persian scenarios (the right side of the table) as to the use of tag questions, hedges and intensifiers.

As shown in the table, none of the six Chi-squares computed can reject the null-hypothesis. This shows that there is no difference between English males and females with regard to the use of the three linguistic categories mentioned above. Similar results were found concerning Persian males and females.

**Table 2: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Cross Gender, Same Culture Data.**

<b>Cross gender, same culture</b>		
	<b>English scenarios</b>	<b>Persian scenarios</b>
	<b>Males vs. Females</b>	<b>Males vs. Females</b>
I	X= 0.43 NS	X= 0.75 NS
H	X= 0.03 NS	X= 1.32 NS
T	X= 0.4 NS	X= 0.2 NS

NS= Not Significant P> 0.05

***Statistics on Same Gender, Cross Culture Data***

In this part, the main purpose was to find out and compare the performance of each gender in English and Persian scenarios regarding the use of intensifiers, hedges and tag questions differently. Therefore, comparisons were made between the utterances produced by males in English and Persian scenarios. The same was repeated for females, i.e. performance of females in English and Persian scenarios.

**Table 3: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Same Gender, Cross Culture Data.**

<b>Same gender, Cross culture</b>		
	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
	<b>English scenarios/Persian scenarios</b>	<b>English scenarios/Persian scenarios</b>
I	X= 0.14 NS	X= 0.02 NS
H	X= 1.6 NS	X= 0.09 NS
T	X= 0.97 NS	X= 0.001 NS

NS= Not Significant  $P > 0.05$

As shown in Table 3, the hypothesis of no difference cannot be rejected concerning English and Persian males, nor can it be rejected regarding English and Persian females. This indicates that language is not a contributing factor in using the above categories, at least given the corpus studied by the researchers.

#### ***Statistics on Cross Gender, Cross Culture Data***

In this section, the main objective was to look for any significant difference between males in English scenarios and females in Persian scenarios, or between females in English scenarios and males in Persian scenarios with regard to the use they made of intensifiers, tag questions and hedges.

**Table 4: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Cross Gender, Cross Culture Data.**

	<b>Cross gender, Cross culture</b>	
	<b>English Males vs. Persian Females</b>	<b>English Females vs. Persian Males</b>
I	X= 0.25 NS	X= 1.06 NS
H	X= 0.02 NS	X= 2.04 NS
T	X= 0.02 NS	X= 0.18 NS

NS= Not Significant  $P > 0.05$

The results in the above table are similar to what was found in Tables 2 and 3. That is, the difference between the groups under study is not great enough to reject the null-hypothesis. This shows that even when we make comparisons while taking into account the two criteria of gender and language, again the two groups are similar.

### *Statistics on Cross Culture Data*

In this closing section, both males and females in English scenarios were considered as one group, and all males and females in Persian scenarios were taken as another group. These two whole groups were later compared the results of which have been summarized in Table 5 below:

**Table 5: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Cross Culture Data.**

	<b>Cross culture</b>	
	<b>Males &amp; Females in English scenarios (Group 1) vs. Males &amp; Females in Persian scenarios (group 2)</b>	
I	X= 0.134	NS
H	X= 1.07	NS
T	X= 0.539	NS

NS= Not Significant  $P > 0.05$

Again, the Chi-squares computed in Table 5 prove that there is no significant difference between the two groups under study. This finding, like what was found in the previous tables, is not in line with the ideas put by Lakoff concerning linguistic differences between the two genders.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

As we mentioned earlier, Robin Lakoff has put forward the most complete analysis concerning linguistic differences between males and females. She believes that gender differences in language usage reflect different and unequal roles and status. She proposed that because of the low status of women and the social pressure on them to talk like a lady, women as compared to men tend to use more hedges, intensifiers, super polite forms, question intonations, etc.. Results obtained in this study indicate that Lakoff's ideas concerning tag questions, hedges and intensifiers cannot be held, given the corpus under study and thus the three null hypotheses stated earlier can be upheld.

In Lakoff's opinion, the functions of tag questions are two-fold: they soften the impact of assertions and they express uncertainty. If we accept this idea, we must accept that women are usually uncertain, but for two reasons Lakoff's findings are unacceptable: (1) As stated by Dubois and Crouch (1975) Lakoff made these ground-breaking ideas based on her intuition. In fact, she did not conduct a scientific research. (2) Other researchers did not confirm what Lakoff had proposed. For example, Holmes (1993) found out that certain types of tag question are used more by men than by women, i.e. *modal tags*, and certain other types are used more by women, i.e. *facilitative tags*.

Holmes (ibid.) states that facilitative tags are addressee-oriented, expressing the speaker's solidarity or positive attitude to the addressee. On the contrary, modal tags are speaker-oriented and signal speaker's desire for confirmation. Furthermore, in a research carried out by Cameron et al. (1998), it was found that men used more facilitative and modal tags than women did. But, as was mentioned before, the Chi-squares computed in this paper revealed no significant difference between males and females with regard to the use of tag questions.

Lakoff (1975) also believes that women use more hedges than men do. She identifies three types of hedges as follows: those showing that the speaker is unsure; those used for the sake of politeness and finally those characterizing women's language - the language of those who are out of power in society. But, like what was found concerning tag questions in this study, again Lakoff's ideas concerning hedges could not be upheld. The Chi-squares computed in this study confirmed no significant difference between males and females with regard to the use of hedges. This finding is in line with what Holmes (1986) found concerning the use of 'you know' in the speech of men and women. Holmes did not find any significant differences between the two genders. Similarly, what was found concerning

intensifiers, in this research, did not confirm Lakoff's ideas. No significant difference was found between the groups under study with regard to the use of intensifiers.

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