

Beyond the Myth: Gender, Language, and the Dynamics of Speech Quantity

Dr. Anila Hima¹, Dr. Bukuroshe Isufaj²

¹University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali", Faculty of Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages
anila.hima@univlora.edu.al

²University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali", Faculty of Humanities, Department of Foreign Languages
bukuroshe.isufaj@univlora.edu.al

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Abstract

The question of whether women talk more than men has sparked considerable interest among both the general public and linguistic researchers. Numerous sociolinguistic studies have sought to explore this issue; however, their findings have been inconsistent. While some studies suggest that women are more talkative, others indicate that men speak more, and yet others report no significant difference in the amount of speech between the two genders. This paper aims to provide a critical review of the existing research on this gender-based stereotype. Firstly, it argues that there is no definitive answer to the question, "Do women talk more than men?" Secondly, it explores how gender differences in verbosity may vary depending on a range of contextual and social factors.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, gender differences, verbosity, context of discourse, structure of interaction.

Introduction

People's opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about language are known as language ideologies. These ideologies influence how we speak, how we behave, and how we judge the way others speak. A common belief, found in many languages through sayings and proverbs, is that women talk more than men do, talk about unimportant things and gossip.

For example:

Three women make a whole market. (Sudan)

A woman better swallows her teeth than language. (France)

The only sword that ever rows is not a woman's tongue. (Armenia)

One who does not like women who talk too much should remain celibate. (Congo)

One man, one word – one woman, one dictionary. (Germany)

Select wife better by ear than by eye. (UK)

Women are nine times more talkative than men are. (Israel)

When both husband and wife wear pants, it is not difficult to tell them apart - he is the one who is listening. (America)

But does this stereotype actually match what research shows? Studies examining how much men and women talk have produced mixed results.

- Most studies suggest that men actually talk more than women.
- Some studies show the opposite, that women talk more.
- Others find no significant difference between the two.

This paper aims to carefully review the research on this stereotype. It has two main purposes: (1) firstly, to show that there is no simple or definite answer to

whether women talk more than men; (2) and second, to explore the reasons why people still believe there is a difference, even if the research doesn't fully support it.

Some of the questions this paper addresses are: Do women really talk more than men? Do they dominate the speaking time during conversations? Do men find it difficult to take turns, as it may be understood if women speak more than men? And if these ideas aren't backed up by research, why do the stereotypes continue to exist?

Sociolinguistic studies

The belief that "*Women talk more than men*" has prompted numerous studies, which aim to prove its authenticity. According to James and Drakich, "there are 63 studies published between 1951 and 1991 that addressed the issue of gender-based differences in the amount of talk"ⁱ. Studies have found that men talk more than women in some contexts, but women talk more in other contexts. There are also studies that have found no gender differences in the amount of talk.

Studies which show that men are more talkative than women

Research has shown that men tend to be more talkative than women in specific settings. For instance, studies found that men spoke more during workshopsⁱⁱ, television panel discussionsⁱⁱⁱ, email conversations^{iv} and casual conversations between married couples^v.

Herring et al.^{vi} examined online interactions and concluded that men contributed more, interpreting this as a form of dominance. Similarly, Fishman^{vii} argued that during mixed-gender conversations, men typically spoke twice as much as women. A large comparative study by Deborah James and Janice Drakich^{viii}, reviewing 56 studies on American men and women's speech patterns, found that only two studies showed women speaking more than men, while the vast majority confirmed that men were more talkative.

James and Drakich also noted that society expects women to talk more in order to nurture relationships, keep conversations going, express empathy and share emotions. Women tend to bond

through sharing feelings and personal stories, whereas men generally bond by engaging in shared activities. Another study by Edelsky and Adams^{ix} looked at political debates on TV and found that male candidates controlled their speaking turns more effectively, allowing them to dominate the speaking time during the debates.

Studies showing that women talk more than men

By analyzing data from 73 studies involving children, Leaper and Smith^x found that girls spoke more than boys, but the difference was very slight. Three years later, they repeated their analysis using adult samples and found that men spoke more than women, although the gap remained very small. In another study, Matthias R. Mehl and his team^{xi} recorded speech over a 17-hour period and discovered that women spoke about 16,215 words, while men spoke around 15,669 words — an immeasurable difference.

Researchers also noted that men's conversations with other men often focused on competition, humor, sports and aggression, whereas women's conversations with other women were more centered on personal topics, such as life experiences, emotions, family and home life. Louann Brizendine, in her book *The Female Brain*^{xii}, claimed that women speak 20,000 words daily on average, compared to just 7,000 words for men. However, this book caused controversy regarding the authenticity of the data. Another controversial neuroscience study by Bowers et al.^{xiii} found that girls have about 30% more FOXP2 protein—often called the "language protein"—than boys. This was suggested as a possible reason why girls might talk more. However, this study says nothing about men and women, because samples for this study were originally rats, but further study was extended to people in ten girls aged three to five years old. The authors themselves warned that further studies with larger groups are needed to properly understand whether this protein difference relates to language abilities in humans.

Studies showing no significant difference in the amount of talk between men and women

Several researchers have indicated that there is no significant overall difference in the amount of talk produced by men and women.

One important review by Aries^{xiv} examined a range of previous studies and found that differences in how much men and women talk were often small, inconsistent, and heavily dependent on the social situation. The researcher emphasized that context, situation, and social role often have a greater impact on speaking behavior than gender itself – that in some cases, men talked more; in others, women did, suggesting that talkativeness was not a stable trait based on gender alone. Hyde and Linn^{xv} conducted a meta-analysis — a statistical method that combines data from multiple studies — on gender differences in verbal ability. Their work concluded that gender differences in verbal behavior, including talkativeness, were very small. They emphasized that any differences that did appear were too minor to be practically meaningful. Building on this, Leaper and Ayres^{xvi} carried out another meta-analysis of 29 studies focused specifically on talkativeness. Their study confirmed that there was no consistent difference between the amount men and women spoke. They highlighted that context plays a crucial role. In public settings (like meetings, classrooms and debates), men sometimes talked more, whereas in private or intimate settings (like conversations with friends or family), women sometimes talked more.

Discussions

As shown, a number of language and gender researchers have attempted to explain why men often appear to talk more than women, particularly in mixed-gender interactions.

Power & status

One widely accepted explanation is the influence of power and social status. It is argued that the broader social dominance men hold is reflected in patterns of conversation, where men tend to occupy more speaking time. Dale Spender^{xvii} suggests that men maintain their dominance by actively preventing women from speaking, by either talking over them, ignoring their contributions, or failing to engage with what they say. Spender also highlights that women's speech is judged against a standard of silence — since silence is traditionally expected from women, any amount of talking by women is often perceived as excessive or inappropriate. This view emphasizes that gendered expectations surrounding speech are socially constructed rather than naturally occurring.

Different socialization

Another important explanation for differences in speaking time comes from the idea of different socialization processes for boys and girls. According to Maltz and Borker^{xviii}, from early childhood, males and females are taught different rules for communication. Boys are generally socialized to use language to assert themselves, compete for attention, and achieve dominance within groups. Girls, however, are taught to use language to foster relationships, create harmony, and offer emotional support. Coates^{xix} reinforces this view by noting that men's interactional style is often competitive, aiming to assert superiority, while women's style is more cooperative, emphasizing mutual support and understanding. These early-learned communication patterns influence adult conversation, often leading to men dominating discussions in mixed-gender settings.

Different communication purposes

In addition to socialization, the underlying purpose of communication differs between genders. Deborah Tannen^{xx} argues that while men often use conversation to negotiate status and independence, women typically use language to seek connection and intimacy. Men's speech is therefore more oriented towards asserting authority or defending territory within a conversation, whereas women's speech often aims at building rapport and nurturing relationships. Recognizing these differing purposes helps explain why men and women may appear to behave differently in conversations, even if the overall amount they speak is sometimes similar.

Different topic interests

Differences in topic preference also contribute to conversational patterns. Jennifer Coates^{xxi} notes that men frequently prefer discussing impersonal topics such as current events, politics, technology, and sports. These subjects often allow for showcasing knowledge and establishing status within the group. In contrast, women are more likely to engage in discussions that are personal, involving emotions, experiences, relationships, and home life. Because personal topics typically encourage longer, more elaborated contributions, the choice of topic can

influence perceptions about who talks more and how conversations are structured.

Different conversational styles

Another factor to consider is the conversational style, particularly in the handling of simultaneous speech, or instances where people talk at the same time. Coates^{xxii} observes that for women, simultaneous speech often serves a supportive function, showing enthusiasm and agreement (a phenomenon she relates to "polyphony," where multiple voices harmonize). For men, however, overlapping speech is more likely to be competitive, aiming to seize the conversational floor ("cacophony," or chaotic noise), a contrast that Davies^{xxiii} also describes. These stylistic differences often lead to misunderstandings in mixed-gender interactions, where women's cooperative interruptions may be misread as rudeness and men's assertive interruptions may be seen as aggressive dominance.

Different settings: private vs. public domain

Finally, the setting where conversations occur plays a significant role. Deborah Tannen^{xxiv} emphasizes the distinction between public and private spheres. In public contexts — such as meetings, academic discussions, or workplace debates — men are often more vocal because these environments reward assertiveness and competitive speaking styles associated with status-building. Women, on the other hand, tend to speak more in private settings, such as conversations among close friends or family members, where the primary goal is emotional connection rather than public display. The fear of negative judgment or the feeling that their contributions may not be valued in public can also cause women to speak less in formal environments.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the inquiry into whether women speak more than men has generated a substantial body of research characterized by considerable variation and inconsistency in findings. While certain studies suggest that women engage in more verbal activity, others conclude that men are more verbally dominant, and yet others report negligible or context-dependent differences. These

inconsistencies underscore the impossibility of offering a straightforward answer to the question "Do women talk more than men?" The evidence consistently demonstrates that the quantity of speech produced by individuals is not determined solely by gender but is instead influenced by a complex constellation of sociocultural, situational, and individual variables.

Factors such as age, ethnicity, and cultural background significantly mediate speech patterns, with variations often emerging across different life stages and within distinct sociocultural frameworks. The situational context in which communication occurs — including the degree of formality, the public or private nature of the setting, and the roles adopted by speakers — further conditions linguistic behavior. The speaker's social identity, encompassing roles such as teacher, guest, political figure, spouse, or parent, as well as the individual's level of social confidence and familiarity with the topic, exerts a substantial impact on the volume and style of their speech.

Contemporary research has increasingly shifted away from binary comparisons between men and women, favoring instead intragroup analyses that examine patterns of variation among women and among men within specific social groups. This more nuanced approach recognizes the heterogeneity within gender categories and highlights how variables such as socioeconomic status, professional background, education level, and local cultural norms intersect with gender to influence communicative behavior.

Furthermore, recent studies emphasize the situational fluidity of speech production. Speaking patterns are now understood to be dynamic and contextually contingent, varying not only between individuals but also within individuals across different social contexts. An individual's degree of talkativeness is thus revealed to be a flexible and responsive feature of communicative behavior, rather than a fixed attribute linked in a deterministic way to gender.

Ultimately, simplistic and essentialist stereotypes concerning gender and verbal behavior do not withstand empirical scrutiny. Rather, the complex interplay of social, cultural, contextual, and individual factors must be considered in any serious analysis of language use. Critical engagement with these issues allows for a deeper understanding of communication as a socially constructed and

dynamically negotiated practice, rather than one rigidly determined by biological sex.

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