The Female Register: An Empirical Study of Lakoff’s Hypotheses
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Sociolinguists (e.g. Swacker 1975) and anthropologists (e.g. Hall 1959) are increasingly aware of the fact that sex, like social class or subcultural group, is a variable which strongly affects speech (Thorne & Henley 1975). While sex-exclusive differentiation (i.e. separate male and female languages) now appears to be an almost nonexistent phenomenon, sex-preferred differentiation seems to be widespread across a number of languages and language families (Bodine 1975). In particular, recent studies indicate that syntax (Labov 1966), intonation (Brend 1972), and pronunciation (Trudgill 1972) in spoken English all vary as a function of the sex of the speaker.

A few researchers (e.g. Swacker 1975; Trudgill 1972) have speculated about the social and psychological implications of the observed sex-preferred differentiation in spoken language. By far the most complete analysis has been proposed by Robin Lakoff (1973, 1975). Lakoff argues that language gives concrete expression to implicit social norms. Language, says Lakoff, both reflects and subtly reinforces social order. When males and females are referenced by divergent terms (e.g. ‘man’ for adult male; ‘lady’ or ‘girl’ for adult female) and when they differ in their language styles, males and females are reminded of their divergent roles. Furthermore, Lakoff maintains, sex differences in language usage not only reflect different roles; they actually reflect unequal roles or status. Our society is often portrayed as one in which males are valued more than females (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkranz 1972; Goldberg 1968; Gornick & Moran 1971; Hacker 1951). The inferior status of women in society as a whole, argues Lakoff, is echoed by observable differences between men’s language and women’s language. Men’s language, according to Lakoff’s thesis, is assertive, adult, and direct. Women’s language is immature, hyperformal or hyperpolite, and non-assertive. In short, ‘speaking like a lady’ helps keep females ‘in their place’.

What specifically does it mean to ‘speak like a lady’? Lakoff discusses six characteristics of women’s speech in our culture. The first is lexical choice. Certain words (e.g. ‘mauve’) are used almost solely by females. Second is the use of ‘empty adjectives’ such as ‘divine’ and ‘cute’. Not only are these adjectives

[1] We would like to express our thanks to Anne Carberry, Susan Staffin, and Jeff Tager for assistance in running the studies.
meaningless but, in contrast to male adjectives (e.g. 'great', 'terrific'), they are noticeably devoid of any connotation of power. Third is the use of the question intonation in conjunction with declaratives. Tag questions (e.g. 'It's a nice day, isn't it?') allow women to make a statement without making an assertion. In addition to using tag questions, women often pronounce declarative statements with a rising intonation. These statements are most frequently made in response to a direct question, as in the interchange: 'when will dinner be ready?' 'oh, about eight o'clock?' Fourth is the frequent use of modifiers or hedges (e.g. 'sort of', 'kind of', 'I guess') which, again, decrease the assertiveness of the commitment involved in any statement. Intensive use of the word 'so' is the fifth characteristic. Finally, 'speaking like a lady' means using hyper-correct and polite grammar. Females adhere to the rules of politeness while males adhere to the rules of direct discourse. As a result, female speech is typically indirect, repetitious, and unclear while male speech is typically direct, clear, and precise.

Lakoff refers to the six characteristics outlined here as aspects of 'women's language'. For clarity of exposition, however, we shall employ the term 'the female register'. Both men and women may use the female register. The distinguishing feature of the female register is not, therefore, that it is used exclusively by women but rather that it embodies the female role in our society. The female register is both expressive (e.g. polite rather than direct and informative) and non-assertive. Both of these attributes are, of course, central aspects of the stereotyped feminine role in our culture (Deaux 1976).

Although Lakoff argues strongly that female language differs in predictable and measurable ways from male language, she admits that she does 'not have precise statistical evidence' (16), and that the data on which she bases her claims 'have been gathered mainly by introspection' (4). Concrete empirical data relating to Lakoff's thesis about the female register are slight (Kramer 1974). Lakoff (58–9) cites three studies which purported to test for the occurrence of the female register. The first, using a questionnaire, found that male and female respondents did not differ in the extent to which they felt they used the female register. The second failed to find sex differences in freshmen composition themes. The third study, in which subjects created cartoon captions, also failed to reveal sex differences. None of these studies, as Lakoff herself notes, provided a valid test of the hypothesis that women's speech differs from men's speech in the ways specified. The first study confused self awareness with actual practice. The second study involved formal written language and did not necessarily reflect actual speech or informal writing. The third study used a highly artificial and contextless situation.

In contrast to the studies cited by Lakoff is an observational study performed by Kriedberg and reported by Berko-Gleason (1975). Kriedberg analyzed the speech of a small sample of mothers and fathers and of male and female daycare teachers to very young children. Among other things, he found that males used
the imperative more than females did, and that parents used the imperative much more than teachers did. The percentages of sentences which were in the imperative form (rather than declarative or question form) were: 38.33% for fathers; 19% for mothers; 11% for male teachers; and 2% for female teachers (Berko-Gleason 1975: 292). While Lakoff did not formally specify the infrequent use of commands as a characteristic of the female register, Kriedberg’s study clearly supports the hypothesis that female speech is less forceful or dominant than male speech. The data appear especially compelling in view of the observation that male teachers far exceeded the female teachers in the use of the imperative, even though male daycare teachers hardly conform to the masculine stereotype of our culture. It is worthy of note, on the other hand, that Kriedberg also found differences which are not explicitly predicted by Lakoff’s model. These were the differences due to role (parent vs. teacher).

The purpose of the three studies reported here is to test Lakoff’s hypotheses more directly and adequately than has been done to date. In all three studies, samples of male and female speech have been scored for the presence of the female register. In one of the studies, the speech samples were collected in the laboratory under controlled conditions. The other studies involved systematic observation (Weick 1968) in the real world, once at an information center and once at a suburban police station. The police station study also provided data on the issues of status and role, independent of the sex of the speaker.

Based on Lakoff’s analysis of the characteristics of ‘women’s language’, we predicted that the female register would be more marked in women’s speech than in men’s speech.\[3\] Based on Lakoff’s argument that the female register is an expression of inferior status, we also hypothesized that status would affect the use of female register. More specifically, we predicted that low status speakers would employ the female register more than high status speakers and that speech directed to a high status person would be marked by the female register more than speech directed to a low status person.

**STUDY I**

**Method**

**Subjects.** The subjects were 16 male and 16 female undergraduates at Boston University.

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\[3\] Lakoff, at one point, says that ‘women’s language’ means ‘language restricted in use to women (7)’. A strict interpretation of this assertion would lead to the prediction that the female register would be found only in women’s speech. This is, of course, an extreme prediction. However, the thrust of Lakoff’s argument is not that there is sex-exclusive differentiation but rather that there is sex-preferred differentiation. Therefore, our more tempered prediction that the female register will be more marked in women’s than in men’s speech seems wholly consistent with Lakoff’s position.
Faye Crosby and Linda Nyquist

Procedure. The speech samples were gathered as part of a study on the effects of mode of interaction (Vision vs. No Vision) on conversation management (Crosby 1976). Each subject engaged in four 3-minute dyadic conversations with a person of the same sex. Half of the conversations were between friends, and half were between strangers. In half of the conversations, the participants held each other in view, while a curtain was drawn between the subjects in the other half of the conversations. All of the conversations were on assigned topics (e.g., the merits of Boston), and all were tape recorded. The order of conversations and of topics was counterbalanced. Transcripts were made of all the tape recorded conversations.

Variables. The major independent variable was sex of dyad (male, female). The dependent variable was amount of female register. The dependent variable was obtained by scoring from the transcripts. The coder was blind to the sex of the speakers. One point was given each time a characteristic of the female register occurred. The specific characteristics were taken from Lakoff, but the list of words included under the characteristics of adjectives and of hedges was expanded. The complete set included: (1) empty adjectives (charming, cool, cute, divine, fascinating, hip, nice, quaint, such, weird, wonderful); (2) tag questions; (3) hedges (and stuff, and things like that, kind of, kinda, I don't know, sort of, sort a) and (4) so. For each conversation, a total score was obtained by summing the points. Word choice, intonation pattern, and politeness were not scored.

Results
Since preliminary analysis showed no differences due to mode (Vision vs. No Vision) or to acquaintance (Friend vs. Stranger), the 32 female conversations were compared with the 32 male conversations. The hypothesis that the female register is more marked in women's speech than in men's speech was confirmed. The mean number of instances of the female register was 5.16 in the conversations between females and only 3.08 in the conversations between males. A one-tailed t-test revealed this difference to be significant ($t = 1.96; df = 62; p < 0.05$).

Study II

Method
Subjects. The subjects were 107 males and 90 females who made inquiries at an information booth at an urban municipal center.

Procedure. Inquiries made by males and females to either a male or a female information person were coded by an observer seated at the rear of the information booth. Half of the time the coder was a research assistant who was blind to
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the hypothesis of the study. Fifteen percent of the interactions were coded by two observers to obtain a measure of intercoder reliability. Most inquiries consisted of a single interchange between the individual requesting information and the information person. In the few cases of longer interchanges, only the first minute of speech was coded. The speech of the information person was not coded. The period of observation extended from 19 March to 16 April 1976. All of the conversations coded occurred between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Variables. The independent variables of this study were sex of speaker (male; female) and sex of the information attendant (male; female). The dependent variable was the amount of female register present in the speech of the information seeker. For each speaker a composite score was derived from five subscores. The first subscore was the Hedge Score. Here one point was accorded to each hedge that occurred. The list of hedges was: and stuff, and things like that, kinda, kind of, I don’t know, I guess, I mean, I think, like (used ungrammatically), so, sorta, sort of, you know. The second subscore was for politeness. One point was given each time the speaker said ‘please’ or ‘okay’ (in acknowledgment of information given). Two points were scored for ‘excuse me’, and ‘thanks’, three points for ‘thank you’, four points for ‘thanks a lot’, and 5 points for ‘thank you very much’. The third subscore was Verb Form. One point was scored for each occurrence of ‘could you’ and ‘would you’. The fourth subscore, Initial Contact, involved awarding one point if the information-seeker made initial contact with the salutation ‘hi’ (no one said ‘hello’) and two points if he or she initially said ‘excuse me’. The final subscore was Directness Score. No points were given to abbreviated questions (e.g. ‘room 202?’) or to demands (e.g. ‘tell me where room 202 is’). Direct questions (e.g. ‘where is room 202?’) received one point. Two points were given to questions which could have been answered by ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but which implied a request for information (e.g. ‘do you know where . . .’) and for requests which had a readily identifiable more direct form (e.g. ‘where would the passport office be?’). Three points were scored for requests involving dependent clauses (e.g. ‘I wonder if you could tell me . . . ’).

Results

The reliability check yielded a Pearson’s $r$ of 0.87. Table 1 presents the mean scores of female register for male and female information seekers speaking to male and female attendants. Inspection of this table reveals that male–male speech contained less of the female register than was present in the other three conditions. However, a $2 \times 2$ analysis of variance revealed no significant main effect for sex of speaker ($F = 1.0; df = 1/193; p > 0.1$) or sex of attendant ($F = 0.84; df = 1/193; p > 0.01$). Nor was the interaction between sex of speaker and sex of attendant significant ($F = 0.51; df = 1/193; p > 0.1$).
TABLE I. Mean scores of female dialect – Study II: Sex of speaker × sex of attendant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Seeker</th>
<th>Information Attendant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.94*</td>
<td>4.56*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.59*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.67*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* n = 48; b n = 59; c n = 39; d n = 51.

STUDY III

Method

Subjects. The subjects were three police personnel employed in a suburban police station in Connecticut and 45 male and 45 female clients.

Procedure. A research assistant, who worked as a volunteer in a police office in Connecticut, observed and coded conversations between clients and police personnel. Both speech of client and speech of police personnel were coded on coding sheets during each conversation. The large majority of the conversations involved requests for information or aid on the part of the client who came voluntarily to the station. The conversations were of varying length, but most were about 2 minutes long. A police desk separated the clients and the police personnel during all conversations. The observer sat nearby. He coded all conversations he heard between the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. from 4 March to 10 March 1976, until he had reached the quota of 15 conversations in each cell of the design.

Variables. The independent variables assessed in this study were: role (police personnel; client); sex of speaker (male; female); sex of listener (male; female); and status of the police personnel (officer, clerk). The dependent variable was the amount of female register. One point was given each time a characteristic of the female register occurred, including: (1) tag questions; (2) hedges (using the same list as in Study II); and (3) polite expressions (please, thank you). The phrase ‘thank you very much’ received two points each time it occurred.

[4] To check that clients did in fact perceive the status differences in the police personnel, ten clients were asked to identify the clerk and the officer(s) present. All ten indicated that the officer was a person of higher status. Police personnel also reported that they felt the officers to be of higher status than the clerk.
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Results

Preliminary analysis indicated that the status of the police personnel was not an important variable. The clerk did not differ from the officers in the amount of female register ($F = 0.02; df = 1/86; p > 0.1$). Nor was the speech of the clients directed to the clerk different from the speech of the clients directed to the officers ($F = 1.01; df = 1/86; p > 0.1$). The data were, therefore, analyzed in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance in which the factors were role (client, police personnel), sex of speaker (male, female), and sex of listener (male, female). The mean scores for each cell are presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2. Mean scores of female register – Study III: Role x Sex of speaker x Sex of listener**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Male speaker</th>
<th></th>
<th>Female speaker</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male listener</td>
<td>Female listener</td>
<td>Male listener</td>
<td>Female listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>0.80$^*$</td>
<td>1.13$^*$</td>
<td>1.27$^b$</td>
<td>1.2$^b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client</td>
<td>1.53$^*$</td>
<td>1.83$^*$</td>
<td>2.47$^*$</td>
<td>2.1$^b$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^*$ n = 15; $^b$ n = 30.

**TABLE 3. Summary of analysis of variance – Study III**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role (A)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31.21</td>
<td>16.82$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of speaker (B)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.51</td>
<td>4.05$^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of listener (C)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A x B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A x C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B x C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A x B x C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{**} p < 0.001$, $^* p < 0.05$.

The three-way analysis of variance, summarized in Table 3, revealed that differences due to role were highly significant ($p < 0.001$), with clients employing the female register more than police personnel. Differences due to sex of speaker were also significant ($p < 0.05$) with females using the female register more than males. Differences due to sex of the listener were not significant. None of the interactions was significant.
DISCUSSION

Two of the three studies reported here supported our first hypothesis, based on Lakoff, that women employ the female register to a greater extent than do men. One of the studies was a lab study in which extraneous factors were controlled but in which artificiality might have been high. The other was a field study in which artificiality was low but in which control was also low. In the police station study it was also found that role (police personnel, client) produced highly significant differences, with the female register characterizing the client speech. In the information booth study no significant differences emerged, although the male–male speech was marked by less use of the female register.

Why did the information booth study fail to reveal significant differences when the other two studies did? Three explanations present themselves. First, it is possible that the interchanges were too short to permit variation. In many instances, the conversations observed at the information booth lasted only a few seconds. This explanation is not wholly satisfactory. Differential use of 'please' or of the conditional (e.g. 'could' instead of 'can') might have proven significant even in extremely brief interactions.

A second reason for the differences in findings between the studies is that Study II focused on one characteristic of the female register, politeness, while the other two studies gave more importance to other characteristics (e.g. hedges). Whether hypercorrect and overly polite speech characterizes women's speech to the extent that lack of commitment (or involvement) characterizes women's speech is clearly a question for further research. It may well be that non-assertiveness ought to be considered the central feature of the female register, and that politeness ought to figure less prominently.

The final and most satisfactorily explanation for the lack of findings in Study II is that the information-seeking interaction represented a well-established ritual in our culture (Schegloff 1968). As Lakoff notes, rituals diminish sex differences. In contrast to Study II, Studies I and III measured the female register in less ritualized situations. The implication of the third explanation is that differences between women's speech and men's speech are, to some degree, context specific. That is, in some contexts the difference will be exaggerated and in some they will be attenuated. This conception is consistent with Lakoff's position.

While the empirical data gathered here support Lakoff's hypotheses that the female register is used more by women than by men, they do not necessarily justify her further assertion that women's speech reflects (or is caused by) the low status of women in our society. If we assume that the obtained sex differences in speech were due primarily to sex-status differences, then we should also expect that other types of status differences (in this case, job status) would affect speech. Such was not the case. Study III found that although clients correctly perceived the police officers to be of a higher status than the police clerk, client speech did
not vary as a function of the police person's status. Similarly, the clerk did not exhibit more of the female register than did the officers.

Unlike status, role did have a highly significant effect on speech in Study III. Given these findings, it seems most prudent to attribute sex differences in use of female register to sex differences in roles. It has been shown that role affects spoken language (Robinson 1972). In this vein, Berko-Gleason's (1975) findings, cited earlier, showed that role (parent; teacher) affected the use of imperatives in the speech of adults to young children. We might note, furthermore, that in Berko-Gleason's sample, parents and teachers enjoyed an equally high status vis-à-vis the children to whom they were speaking.

That men and women in our culture play different roles is widely recognized (Garskof 1971; Rossi 1972). Parsons (1965) has characterized the male role as instrumental and the female role as expressive. Lakoff's own distinction between politeness and directness closely parallels Parsons' distinction between expressive and instrumental behavior. Her contrast between male assertiveness and commitment and female non-assertiveness and lack of commitment adds a dimension to the Parsonian analysis of sex roles. This dimension is an important one. It may account for the differences between the results of Study II, on the one hand, and Studies I and III, on the other. More importantly, it is consistent with a large number of other empirical studies (see Deaux 1976). However, while Lakoff's conception of sex roles may be more complete than Parsons', the results of Study III strongly favor a Parsonian analysis of sex difference in language due to *role differentiation* rather than to *status differentiation*.

The mere fact that males and females are assigned to stereotyped roles indicates that ours is a sexist society. As Lakoff points out, this sexism is detrimental to women, depriving them of the option of acting assertively and directly in situations where assertiveness and directness are most functional. A point which Lakoff does not address is that sexism is also detrimental to men, since it limits their options of acting non-assertively and politely in situations where non-assertiveness and politeness are most functional. (For a similar line of reasoning, see Bem (1975), and Bem & Bem (1971).) Lakoff's muted admonitions notwithstanding, we will not create a more egalitarian society by eliminating the female register. Rather, as our society becomes increasingly androgynous, sex differential usage of the female register ought to diminish and, hopefully, one day disappear.

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