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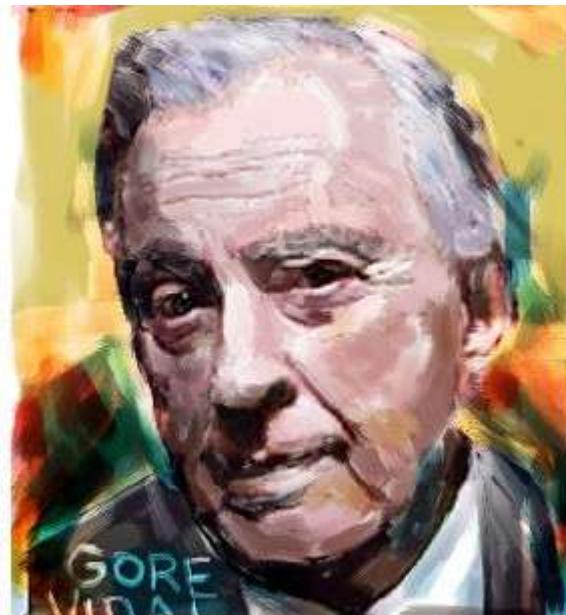
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**Construction of Gendered Identities:  
A Textual Analysis of  
“Visit to a Small Planet” – a One-act Play**

**Muhammad Iqbal Butt, Ph.D.  
Ghulam Abbas, M.Phil. Candidate**



Courtesy: <http://www.pitt.edu/~kloman/vidalframe.html>

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the long standing issue whether the linguistic features help us in construction of gendered identities or not. There are certain features which are believed to be typical of women's speech and some other language features are associated with the speech of men e.g. the use of pronouns His / Her. Similarly, the linguists believe that women generally use 'we' whereas men mostly use the pronoun 'I'. Furthermore, it is generally connoted that women's language is powerless or women make excessive use of powerless features such as hedges, tag questions, pause fillers, speaking in italics, special lexicon, direct quotations, lack of sense of humor, question intonation in declarative context and many more. The researchers have tried to explore how far this claim is true or false.

A wide variety of researchers in their own ways have tried to prove the said issue. They have investigated various situations in different contexts to prove their findings. Despite a lot of research in this field nothing has been finalized and fixed. "Variety is the spice of life", is a universal aspect of life. So is the case with men and women's language. We find men and women using a large variety of languages in different conditions, situations, backgrounds, contexts, scenarios, and so on. How is it possible that after studying, analyzing and investigating fairly a small number of women or men in a remote corner of the world, the final result about the language of women or men can be deduced? It might be possible, if women are studied in a particular situation and background. Investigating a few women or men and declaring a general condition will be misleading and misguiding. Every social group, every class, every age, as well as each person's status has its own priorities, thinking, and perception. If women and men differ in taste, temperament, mood, perception, color, creed, social status and so on, it is but natural that nothing can be finalized about their language.

## **Introduction**

### **Difference between Gender and Sex**

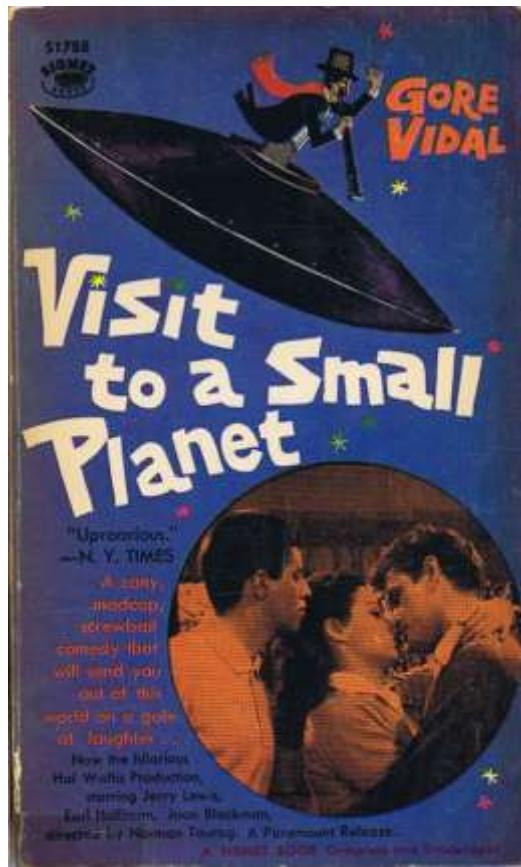
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According to Wharton (2005: 7) sex is only a biological factor with "distinguishable characteristics, which include chromosomal differences, external and internal sexual structures, hormonal productions and other psychological differences, and secondary sex characteristics". The biological aspects of sex for Delamont (1990: 7) involve 'physiology, anatomy, genetics, and hormones' whereas the non-biological aspects of gender are the differences between males and females like 'clothes, interests, attitudes, behaviors and aptitudes'.

In this regard Meyerhoff (2006) asserts, gender "is a social property: something acquired or constructed through your relationships with others and through an individual's adherence to certain cultural norms and proscriptions". According to Jackson & Gee (2005:116) "Gender is fluid, negotiated and constructed across different social and cultural contexts". Thus,

gender indicates the socially constructed roles, behaviours and characteristics that a particular society deems appropriate for men and women.

### **Gender and Language: Gendered Language**

Gender stereotypes that exist in language operate in a particular society in a number of ways of which language is one. The connotations of words, or the language used are very important in relating it to gender, because language is gendered both explicitly and implicitly; and connotations attached to words are a frequently used tool of gendering language implicitly. Romaine (1994) asserts cultural stereotypes exhibit, for instance, ‘spinster’ having negative connotation in contrast to a ‘bachelor.’ This extends in such a manner that women’s accepted association with relationships is highlighted through language with the use of words like ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’.

“Women’s Language” or “Powerless Language,” a connotation which has stimulated a wide variety of researchers over the years is a jumping point which entails Lakoff’s finding. Lakoff (1975) in his provocative essay, “Women’s Language” asserts that women make excessive use of language features which he connoted powerless. This issue later received a lot of attention all over the world and became a central point of discussion and research especially among the women researchers. They took up this issue and ultimately it became a hot debate and it proved to be a favorite subject among the researchers in the present era.

This modern age is the era of women’s emancipation. The emerging women of the time have become a matter of discussion in the world. The long ignored and disregarded creatures (women) have become a central focus of attention in this world of ours. They have captured the interest and curiosity of the world at large. They are being valued and judged in every sphere and in every walk of life. That is the reason that the very concept of their lives has been explored.

The debate on ‘language and gender’ knows no bounds in the present scenario. Every now and then, new investigations and opinions are being formed in this context. Everyone

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(researchers) though is working and investigating in his / her own jurisdiction and sphere, and one thing is common in all such enquiry, which is the issue of powerlessness in women's language. But it would be wrong to say that this is the last and final word. One has to assess this issue from case to case, place to place, culture to culture, society to society, situation to situation, race to race and so on.

Therefore, our study in this background might not be taken as the final word. It is just a new horizon or exploration with reference to a piece of literature. No doubt, a lot has been done and said already in this context; yet it needs further exploration and investigation. We are sure, the more we explore the issue the better the result would be. It is in fact a long-debated discussion which may never come to an end. The discussion in this regard is very productive as many new and interesting aspects related to the discussion are emerging, which otherwise, would make the current thinking and perception stand still.

As we have already mentioned, a lot has been done in this context, especially in vocalized discourses in natural setting At the same time we should not ignore the written texts, particularly of the dramatic genre, where we come across a wide variety of men and women's language samples. Perhaps it might not be an apt situation for investigation and research, but we cannot ignore it. It is the most vital part of literature and even of human life. Therefore, we have taken up the issue of a literary text in this connection.

### **“Visit to a Small Planet”**

We have selected a one act play, “Visit to a Small Planet” by Gore Vidal. Though the play does not take place in natural setting, the environment is a controlled one. Our interest is to evaluate the features of women's language in a controlled environment. The play has a scientific background full of situations creating suspense. All of the characters in the play have been put in a water-tight compartment. Each of their actions is being observed and their conversation is being recorded, the reason being, the issue is of national security.

In this one-act play, a scientific object (spaceship) lands in the backyard of Mrs. Spelding's house. The two female characters, Mrs. Spelding (the mother) and Ellen (the daughter), and male characters, Mr. Spelding (the father), General Power (the high ranking military officer), ADIE (his assistant), the technicians (helping out Mr. Spelding in his broadcast) and Kreton (a non-native who lands in a spaceship) come into contact with one another. We have tried to analyze and assess their conversation to find out the final outcome. The speech of two females (the mother and the daughter) in comparison to that of the four males (Mr. Spelding, General Power, Kreton, John) is a factor of much fascination. After analyzing and assessing the conversation of the six characters (of two females and four males) interesting and stimulating results have been deduced. Once again we would like to enunciate that it is by no means a hard and fast rule to depend on. It is just an interesting deduction which could perhaps become a stepping stone for future researchers who wish to investigate the issue in this context.

An interesting example in this regard is mentioned here.

Allen corrects her father to use a quotation of Shakespeare properly which her father actually uses for her.

Spelding: More thankless than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful child.

Allen: I don't think that's right. Isn't it "more deadly..."

Mrs. Spelding: Please don't quarrel. It always gives me a headache.

Spelding: I never quarrel. I merely reason, in my simple way, with Miss Know-it-all here.

## Literature Review

Various theories and various observations have been highlighted by many researchers and investigators in the said context over a long period of time. **The Deficit Approach** in Language and Gender studies can be traced at least as far back as the early 1920s, when the renowned linguist Jespersen (1922: 276) devoted a chapter of his book "Language: its Nature, Development and Origin". The very presence of this chapter added in all apparent seriousness in his scholarly book on language, seems to suggest that the language women use

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deviates from the reality of things. Women have a smaller vocabulary and whatever vocabulary they have is not always used properly. Women also suffer, he says, from inability to complete a sentence, and while there is more volume of talk from women, there is less substance in it. But none of these claims were based on evidence. These opinions were based on pure conjecture on Jespersen's part.

The modern study of language and gender began with the publication of Robin Lakoff's ground breaking article, "Language and Women's Place" (1973), expanded into a book form in 1975. Lakoff identifies quantifiable differences in language use between men and women. According to her, these features demonstrate that women's talk is confined to frivolous, non-serious matters that relate to their specific interests which express approval of the trivial and convey a personal and emotional reaction to the subject matter. According to her speculations and personal observations, women use more tag questions as compared to men. They use sentences with more rising intonations than men. Then she adds that women use more hedges such as 'well', 'y'know'; talking in such a manner they avoid making forthright statements. Hence women's use of hedges is evidence for hesitancy, making them appear less assertive than men. They talk in italics i.e. they give double force to certain words in order to convey the importance of what they are saying. Italics convey doubts about self-expression and one's fears 'that their words are apt to have no impact'. Some studies seem to support Lakoff's hypothesis that women indeed use more tag questions than men in certain contexts (Siegler and Seigler, 1976, Crosby and Nyquist, 1977), whereas, Dubios and Crouch (1975) listed all the examples of formal tag questions as well as informal tags. A total of 33 tag questions were all produced by men.

William O' Barr and Bowman Atkins (1980) found some females (of low social status) using the features in accordance with Lakoff's categories while others (of high status) did not. Male witnesses varied in the same way. This view has been challenged by Holmes (1984), Coats (1987) and Cameron (1989). Holmes analyzed tag questions according to whether they express primarily **modal** or **affective** meaning. Findings showed that women and men did not differ greatly in total usage. Cameron McAlindin and O'Leary's (1989)

study of tag questions supported Holmes' findings. The striking finding was that powerless participants never used affective tags. Deficit Approach has been criticized because it treats men's linguistic practice as the norm, and renders women's linguistic practices as problematic, and treats women as an undifferentiated group. Dominance Approach sees women as an oppressed group and interprets linguistic differences in women's and men's speech in terms of men's dominance and women's subordination (Cameron D. and Coats J., 1986). According to this theory in mixed sex conversations men are more likely to interrupt than women.

Don Zimmerman and Candace West reported that in 11 conversations between men and women, men used 46 interruptions while women only two. Zimmerman and West, later in another paper, 'Women's Place in Everyday Talk' observed that male speakers regularly interrupt female speakers in mixed pairs, even though the interruptions are rare in male-male pairs. They claim that women in contemporary American society, like children have restricted rights to speak, and that interruptions are used both to exhibit and to accomplish socially sanctioned relations of dominance and submission. (Zimmerman and West, 1998)

Bilous and Krauss (1988) claim that there are more interruptions in female-female interactions than in male-male interactions. Dale Spender (1980) in her monumental piece, "Man-made Language" refers to the work of Zimmerman and West, and argues that as a result of patriarchy meaning is defined by men (e.g. literally by writing dictionaries), women's meaning are not encoded in the language. Language encodes male versions of events; it reflects male interests and words have a male bias. She further adds that male language is treated as the norm.

Victoria De Francisco (1998) in her article, "The Sound of Silence: How Men Silence Women in Marital Relation", focuses on noncooperation in interaction. Pamela Fishman (1980) found that although the women talk more than men, they were less successful than men in getting their topics accepted. Joan Swan observes that dominance can be achieved by male speakers without the complicity of women.

An alternative explanation of women's and men's language use derives from the work of Daniel, Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982). Maltz and Borker argued that women and men constitute different gender subcultures. They learn the rule of 'friendly interaction' as children when a great deal of interaction takes place in single-sex peers groups. Maltz and Borker's work is closely related to research on misunderstandings in inter-ethnic communication. Tannen argues that women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy while men speak and hear a language of status and independence. The British linguist Jennifer Coates has also been concerned primarily with differences in women's and men's speech, but her position is different from Tannen's. Coates' position is more explicitly a feminist one.

### **Research Question**

Do men and women differ in the use of linguistic features in the same way in all situations?

### **Research Methodology**

For the present study, in order to look into the construction of gendered identities, the researchers have used linguistic features of both women and men's speech. Although it is debatable as to who (man / woman) makes the excessive use of certain language features. The researchers selected a one-act play "Visit to a Small Planet" by Gore Vidal included in the text book of the intermediate course prescribed by the Punjab Textbook Board, Lahore, Pakistan. Although Lakoff and his followers have highlighted very many language features (tag questions, hedges, pause fillers, empty adjective, super polite form, direct quotation, special lexicon, question intonation in declarative contexts, lack of a sense of humor, hyper correct grammar and pronunciation, speaking in italics and many more), and the researchers have chosen a few of them i.e. tag questions, hedges and pause fillers etc. The researchers collected data with regard to the said language features, after assessing the conversation

between different characters in mixed gathering. The researchers have tried to find out how they interact with one another in different situations.

## A Brief Reflection of Language Features

### 1. Hedges

“It is sort of hot in here.” “I’d kind of like to go.”

### 2. (Super) Polite Forms:

“I’d really appreciate it if .....” “Would you please open the door, if you do not mind?” and so on.

### 3. Tag Questions:

“John is here, isn’t he?” Instead of “Is John here?”

### 4. Speaking in Italics:

Intonational emphasis equivalent to underlining words in written language; emphatic: ‘so’ or ‘very’ and so on.

### 5. Empty Adjective:

(Divine; charming; cute; sweet; adorable; lovely; and so on)

### 6. Hyper Correct Grammar and Pronunciation:

(Bookish grammar; more formal enunciation). For example: Teaching the learners to avoid “It’s me” and insisting in “ It is I.” In the play Allen corrects her father to use a quotation of Shakespeare properly.

### 7. Lack of Sense of Humor:

Women are said to be poor joke tellers and too frequently ‘miss the point’ in jokes told by men.

### 8. Direct Quotations:

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(Use of direct quotation instead of paraphrases) An example: “More thankless than a serpent’s tooth is an ungrateful child.”

## **9. Special Lexicon:**

In domains like colors where words like magenta, chartreuse and so are typically used only by women.

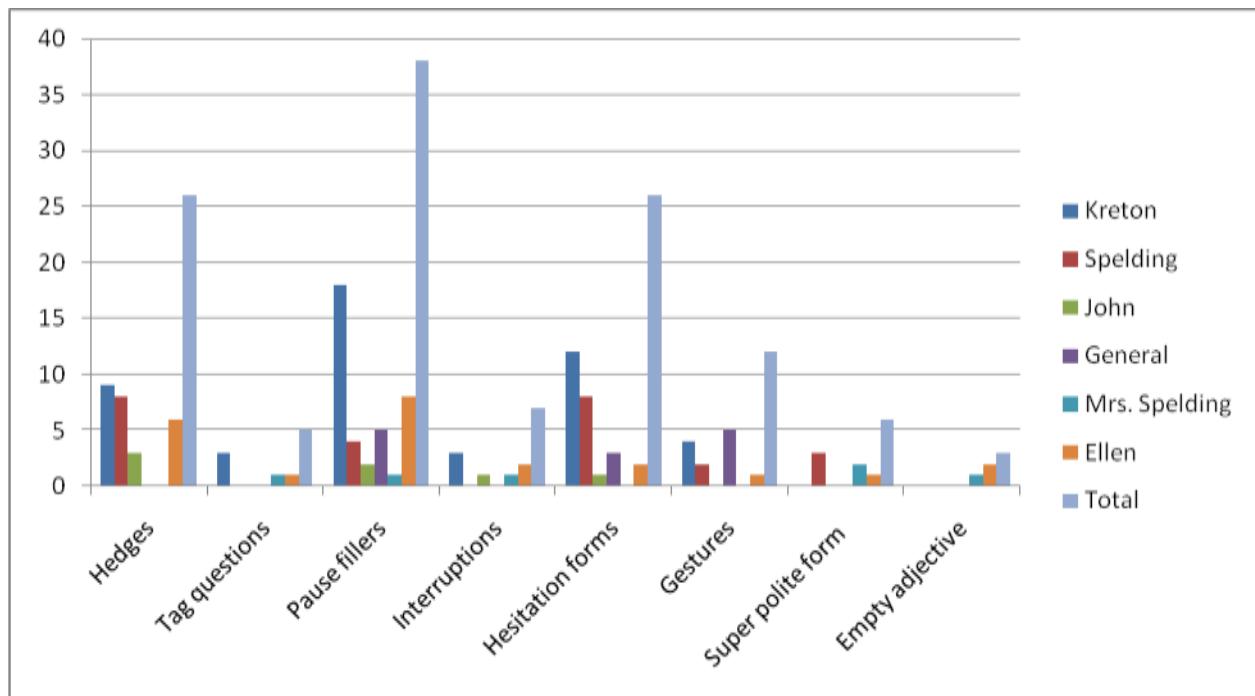
## **10. Question Intonation in Declarative Contexts:**

For example in response to the question, “When will dinner be ready?” an answer like “Around six O’ clock?”, as though seeking approval and asking whether that time will be okay.

**Use of Language Features**

No.	Type of Language features	Kreton	Spelding	John	General	Mrs. Spelding	Ellen	Total
1	Hedges	9	8	3	0	0	6	26
2	Tag questions	3	0	0	0	1	1	5
3	Pause fillers	18	4	2	5	1	8	38
4	Interruptions	3	0	1	0	1	2	7
5	Hesitation forms	12	8	1	3	0	2	26
6	Gestures	4	2	0	5	0	1	12
7	Super polite form	0	3	0	0	2	1	6
8	Empty adjective	0	0	0	0	1	2	3
Total no. of LF used by each individual		49	25	7	13	6	23	123

Table 1: Types of Language Features used by different characters.



Graphical Representation of Table 1.

### Use of Hedges

The analysis shows that Male 1 uses 9 out of total 26 hedges. The hedges used by Male 1 are: really (L 85, 98), especially (L 105), I know (L 111), I suppose (L 151), I suggest (L 194), all right (L 261), you know (L279), and I mean (L 286). Male 2 uses 8 out of 26 hedges i.e. apparently (L 35), roughly (L 43), perhaps (L 59), kind of (L 61), come on (L 80), I don't suppose (L 100) and certainly (L 175). Male 3 uses 3 out of 26 hedges i.e. like this (L 106), really (L 160) and I wish (L 169). Male 4 uses no hedge. Female 1 uses no hedge. Female 2 uses 6 out of 26 hedges i.e. may be (L 49), you mean (L 56), come on (L 67), kind of (L 97), I think (L 158) and certainly (L 238).

### Use of Tag Questions

Male 1 uses 3 out of 5 tag questions i.e. isn't it? (L 73), don't you? (L 135) and is there? (L 271).

Male 2 uses no tag questions. Male 3 uses no tag questions. Male 4 uses no tag questions. Female 1 uses 1 out of 5 tag questions i.e. do you? (L 36). Female 2 uses 1 out of 5 tag questions i.e. isn't it? (L 23)

### **Use of Pause Fillers**

Male 1 uses 18 out of 36 pause filler i.e. oh (L 81, 96, 107, 147, 192, 207, 215, 227, 229, 282); well (L 102, 151, 206, 229, 246): yes (L 121), of course (L261, 271). Male 2 uses 4 out 38 pause fillers i.e. well Use of (L 76, 281), of course (L 93) and oh (L 164). Male 3 use 2 out of 38 pause fillers i.e. well (L 174) and oh (L 232). Male 4 uses 5 out of 38 pause fillers i.e. well (L 124, 274), look (L 134), oh (L 126,210). Female 1 uses 1 out of 38 pause fillers i.e. Oh (L 36). Female 2 uses 8 out of 38 pause fillers i.e. of course (L 9), well (L 110), oh (L 11,18,27,46,53).

### **Use of Interruptions**

Male 1 uses 3 out of 7 interruptions. Male 2 uses no interruption. Male 3 uses 1 out of 7 interruptions. Male 4 uses no interruption. Female 1 uses 1 out of 7 interruptions. Female 2 uses 2 out of 7 interruptions.

### **Use of Hesitation Forms**

Male 1 uses 12 out of 26 hesitation forms in lines 73, 83, 96, 102, 109, 208, 219, 227, 229, 233, 235 and 286. Male 2 uses 8 out of 26 in lines 1, 41, 45, 57, 69, 72, 117 and 281. Male 3 uses 1 out 26 in line 160. Male 4 use 3 out of 26 in lines 122, 210 and 272. Female 1 uses no hesitation form. Female 2 uses 2 out of 26 in lines 64 and 86.

### **Use of Gestures**

Male 1 uses 4 out of 12 gestures in lines 92, 109, 221 and 290. Male 2 uses 2 out of 12 in lines 66 and 165. Male 3 uses no gestures. Male 4 uses 5 out of 12 in lines 142, 203, 207, 210 and 274. Female 1 uses no gestures. Female 2 uses 1 out 12 in line 21.

### **Use of Super Polite Form**

Male 1, male 3and male 4 use no super polite form. Male 2 uses 3 super polite form out of 6 in L 72, 117 and 281. Female 1 uses 2 out of 6 in lines 36 and 38. Female 2 uses 1 out of 6 in line 110.

### **Use of Empty Adjectives**

Male1, Male 2, Male 3 and Male 4 use no empty adjective. Female 1 uses 1 empty adjective in line 3. Female 2 uses 2 empty adjectives in Lines 46 and 247.

As a result of this analysis we observe that total no. of language features used by female 1 are 6 and female 2 are 23. The total no. of language features used by two female mount to 29

The average features used by each female are approximately 15.

All the language features used by male 1 are 49. Male 2 are 25. Male 3 are 7. Male 4 are 13.

The sum of all the features used by four males is 94. The average features used by each male are approximately 24.

### **Conclusion**

This data shows that the selected language features used by men are more in number as compared to the women. The difference noted in this scenario is that of 15 and 24. So, the

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long debated discussion that women make excessive use of language features proves false in our particular case. But at the same time it must be kept in mind that this observation is by no means hard and fast and final. It has been observed that the line of demarcation cannot be drawn anywhere. It varies from case to case, person to person, place to place, culture to culture and society to society. This research is a stepping stone to the other side of the picture which makes it clear that language features are exclusively confined to women. However, the exclusive use of the pronouns like His / Her is a typical case of language use that is gender specific.

In view of the above conclusion and the theoretical debate by different researchers, the concept of ‘women’s language’ needs modification as in the case of Lakoff.

1. All women do not show WL features.
  2. Even some men show WL features.
  3. Gender is not the issue.
  4. Social status is the main concern.
  5. WL features must be testified in context.
  6. The phrase ‘women’s language’ needs renaming.
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