

Robin Lakoff: Talking like a Lady (1973)

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'Women's language' shows up in all levels of the grammar of English. We find differences in the choice and frequency of lexical items; in the situations in which certain syntactic rules are performed; in intonational and other super-segmental patterns. As an example of lexical differences, imagine a man and a woman both looking at the same wall, painted a pinkish shade of purple. The woman may say (2):

(2) The wall is mauve,

with no one consequently forming any special impression of her as a result of the words alone; but if the man should say (2), one might well conclude he was either imitating a woman sarcastically, or a homosexual, or an interior decorator. Women, then, make far more precise discriminations in naming colors than do men; words like *beige*, *ecru*, *aquamarine*, *lavender*, and so on, are unremarkable in a women's active vocabulary, but absent from that of most men. I have seen a man helpless with suppressed laughter at a discussion between two other people as to whether a book-jacket was to be described as 'lavender' or 'mauve'. Men find such discussion amusing because they consider such a question trivial, irrelevant to the real world.

We might ask why fine discrimination of color is relevant for women, but not for men. A clue is contained in the way many men in our society view other 'unworldly' topics, e.g. high culture and the Church, as outside the world of men's work, relegated to women and men whose masculinity is not unquestionable. Men tend to relegate to women things that are not of concern to them, or do not involve their egos. Among these are problems of fine color discrimination. We might rephrase this point by saying that since women are not expected to make decisions on important matters, like what kind of job to hold,

they are relegated the non-crucial decisions as a sop. Deciding whether to name a color 'lavender' or 'mauve' is one such sop.

If it is agreed that this lexical disparity reflects a social inequity in the position of women, one may ask how to remedy it. Obviously, no one could seriously recommend legislating against the use of the terms 'mauve' and 'lavender' by women, or forcing men to learn to use them. All we can do is give women the opportunity to participate in the real decisions of life.

Aside from specific lexical items like color-names, we find differences between the speech of women and that of men in the use of particles that grammarians often describe as 'meaningless'. There may be no referent for them, but they are far from meaningless: they define the social context of an utterance, indicate the relationship the speaker feels between himself and his addressee, between himself and what he is talking about.

As an experiment, one might present native speakers of standard American English with pairs of sentences, identical syntactically, and in terms of referential lexical items, and differing merely in the choice of 'meaningless' particle, and ask them which was spoken by a man, which a woman. Consider:

- (3) (a) Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.
(b) Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

It is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as part of 'women's language', the second as 'men's language'. It is true that many self-respecting women are becoming able to use sentences like (3) (b) publicly without flinching, but this is a relatively recent development, and while perhaps the majority of Middle America might condone the use of (b) for men, they would still disapprove of its use by women. (It is of interest, by the way, to note that men's language is increasingly being used by women, but women's language is not being adopted by men, apart from those who reject the American masculine image (e.g. homosexuals). This is analogous to the fact that men's jobs are being sought by women, but few men are rushing to become housewives or secretaries. The language of the favored group, the group that holds the power, along with its non-linguistic behavior, is generally adopted by the other group, not vice-versa. In any event, it

is a truism to state that the ‘stronger’ expletives are reserved for men, and the ‘weaker’ ones for women.)

Now we may ask what we mean by ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ expletives. (If these particles were indeed meaningless, none would be stronger than any other.) The difference between using ‘shit’ (or ‘damn’, or one of many others) as opposed to ‘oh dear’, or ‘goodness’, or ‘oh fudge’ lies in how forcefully one says how one feels – perhaps, one might say, choice of particle is a function of how strongly one allows oneself to feel about something, so that the strength of an emotion conveyed in a sentence corresponds to the strength of the particle. Hence in a really serious situation, the use of ‘trivializing’ (that is, ‘women’s’) particles constitutes a joke, or at any rate, is highly inappropriate.

- (4) (a) *Oh fudge, my hair is on fire.
(b) *Dear me, did he kidnap the baby?

As children, women are encouraged to be ‘little ladies’. Little ladies don’t scream as vociferously as little boys, are chastised more severely for throwing tantrums or showing temper: ‘high spirits’ are expected and therefore tolerated in little boys; docility and resignation are the corresponding traits expected of little girls. Now, we tend to excuse a show of temper by a man where we would not excuse an identical tirade from a woman: women are allowed to fuss and complain, but only a man can bellow in rage. It is sometimes claimed that there is a biological basis for this behavior difference, though I don’t believe conclusive evidence exists that the early differences in behavior that have been observed are not the results of very different treatment of babies of the two sexes from the beginning; but surely the use of different particles by men and women is a learned trait, merely mirroring nonlinguistic differences again, and again pointing out an inequity that exists between the treatment of men, and society’s expectations of them, and the treatment of women. Allowing men stronger means of expression than are open to women further reinforces men’s position of strength in the real world: for surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions, and a speaker unable – for whatever reason – to be forceful in stating his views, is much less likely to be taken seriously. Ability to use strong particles like ‘shit’ and ‘hell’ is, of course, only incidental to the inequity that exists rather than its cause. But once

again, apparently accidental linguistic usage suggests that women are denied equality partially for linguistic reasons, and that an examination of language points up precisely an area in which inequity exists. Further, if someone is allowed to show emotions, and consequently does, others may well be able to view him as a real individual in his own right, as they could not if he never showed emotion. Here again, then, the behavior a woman learns as ‘correct’ prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual, and further is considered ‘correct’ and necessary for a woman precisely because society does not consider her seriously as an individual.

Similar sorts of disparities exist elsewhere in the vocabulary. There is, for instance, a group of adjectives which have, besides their specific and literal meanings, another use, that of indicating the speaker’s approbation or admiration for something. Some of these adjectives are neutral as to sex of speaker: either men or women may use them. But another set seems, in its figurative use, to be largely confined to women’s speech. Representative lists of both types are below:

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| <i>neutral</i> | <i>women only</i> |
| great | adorable |
| terrific | charming |
| cool | sweet |
| neat | lovely |
| | divine |

As with the color-words and swear-words already discussed, for a man to stray into the ‘women’s’ column is apt to be damaging to his reputation, though here a woman may freely use the neutral words. But it should not be inferred from this that a woman’s use of the ‘women’s’ words is without its risks. Where a woman has a choice between the neutral words and the women’s words, as a man has not, she may be suggesting very different things about her own personality and her view of the subject matter by her choice of words of the first set or words of the second.

- (5) (a) What a terrific idea!
(b) What a divine idea!

It seems to me that (a) might be used under any appropriate conditions by a female speaker. But (b) is more restricted. Probably it is used appropriately (even by the sort of speaker for whom it was normal) only in case the speaker feels the idea referred to to be essentially frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the world at large – only an amusement for the speaker herself. Consider, then, a woman advertising executive at an advertising conference. However feminine an advertising executive she is, she is much more likely to express her approval with (5) (a), than with (b), which might cause raised eyebrows, and the reaction, ‘That’s what we get for putting a woman in charge of this company.’

On the other hand, suppose a friend suggests to the same woman that she should dye her French poodles to match her cigarette lighter. In this case, the suggestion really concerns only her, and the impression she will make on people. In this case, she may use (b), from the ‘woman’s language’. So the choice is not really free: words restricted to ‘women’s language’ suggest that concepts to which they are applied are not relevant to the real world of (male) influence and power.

One may ask whether there really are no analogous terms that are available to men – terms that denote approval of the trivial, the personal; that express approbation in terms of one’s own personal emotional reaction, rather than by gauging the likely general reaction. There does in fact seem to be one such word: it is the recent hippie invention ‘groovy’, which seems to have most of the connotations that separate ‘lovely’ and ‘divine’ from ‘great’ and ‘terrific’ excepting only that it does not mark the speaker as feminine or effeminate.

- (6) (a) What a terrific steel mill!
 (b) *What a lovely steel mill! (male speaking)
 (c) What a groovy steel mill!

I think it is significant that this word was introduced by the hippies, and, when used seriously rather than sarcastically, used principally by people who have accepted the hippies’ values. Principal among these is the denial of the Protestant work ethic: to a hippie, something can be worth thinking about even if it isn’t influential in the power structure, or money-making. Hippies are separated from the activities of the real world just as women are – though in the former case due to a decision on their parts, while this is not uncontroversially case of women. For both these

groups, it is possible to express approval of things in a personal way – though one does so at the risk of losing one’s credibility with members of the power structure. It is also true, according to some speakers, that upper-class British men may use the words listed in the ‘women’s’ column, as well as the specific color words and others we have categorized as specifically feminine, without raising doubts as to their masculinity among other speakers of the same dialect. (This is not true for lower-class Britons, however.) The reason may be that commitment to the work ethic need not necessarily be displayed: one may be or appear to be a gentleman of leisure, interested in various pursuits, but not involved in mundane (business or political) affairs, in such a culture, without incurring disgrace. This is rather analogous to the position of a woman in American middleclass society, so we should not be surprised if these special lexical items are usable by both groups. This fact points indeed to a more general conclusion. These words aren’t, basically, ‘feminine’; rather, they signal ‘uninvolved’, or ‘out of power’. Any group in a society to which these labels are applicable may presumably use these words; they are often considered ‘feminine’, ‘unmasculine’, because women are the ‘uninvolved’, ‘out of power’ group *par excellence*.

Another group that has, at least partially, taken itself out of the search for power and money, is that of academic men. They are frequently viewed by other groups as analogous in some ways to women – they don’t really work, they are supported in their frivolous pursuits by others, what they do doesn’t really count in the real world, and so on. The suburban home finds its counterpart in the ivory tower: one is supposedly shielded from harsh realities in both. Therefore it is not too surprising that many academic men and ministers (especially those who emulate British norms) may violate many of these sacrosanct rules I have just laid down: they often use ‘women’s language’. Among themselves, this does not occasion ridicule. But to a truck driver, a professor saying, ‘What a lovely hat!’ is undoubtedly laughable, all the more so as it reinforces his stereotype of professors as effete snobs.

When we leave the lexicon and venture into syntax, we find that syntactically too women’s speech is peculiar. To my knowledge, there is no syntactic rule in English that only women may use. But there is at least one rule that a woman will use in more conversational situations than a man. (This fact indicates, of course, that the applicability of

syntactic rules is governed partly by social context – the positions in society of the speaker and addressee, with respect to each other, and the impression one seeks to make on the other.) This is the rule of tag-question formation.

A tag, in its usage as well as its syntactic shape (in English) is midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question: it is less assertive than the former, but more confident than the latter. Therefore it is usable under certain contextual situations: not those in which a statement would be appropriate, nor those in which a yes-no question is generally used, but in situations intermediate between these.

One makes a statement when one has confidence in his knowledge and is pretty certain that his statement will be believed; one asks a question when one lacks knowledge on some point, and has reason to believe that this gap can and will be remedied by an answer by the addressee. A tag question, being intermediate between these, is used when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim. So if I say

(7) Is John here?

I will probably not be surprised if my respondent answers ‘no’; but if I say

(8) John is here, isn’t he?

instead, chances are I am already biased in favor of a positive answer, wanting only confirmation by the addressee. I still want a response from him, as I do with a yes-no question; but I have enough knowledge (or think I have) to predict that response, much as with a declarative statement. A tag question, then, might be thought of as a declarative statement without the assumption that the statement is to be believed by the addressee: one has an out, as with a question. A tag gives the addressee leeway, not forcing him to go along with the views of the speaker.

There are situations in which a tag is legitimate, in fact the only legitimate sentence-form. So for example, if I have seen something only indistinctly, and have reason to believe my addressee had a better view, I can say:

(g) I had my glasses off. He was out at third, wasn’t he?

Sometimes we find a tag-question used in cases where the speaker knows as well as the addressee what the answer must be, and doesn’t need confirmation. One such situation is when the speaker is making ‘small talk’, trying to elicit conversation from the addressee:

(10) Sure is hot here, isn’t it?

In discussing personal feelings or opinions, only the speaker normally has any way of knowing the correct answer. Strictly speaking, questioning one’s own opinions is futile. Sentences like (11) are usually ridiculous.

(11) *I have a headache, don’t I?

But similar cases do, apparently, exist, where it is the speaker’s opinions, rather than perceptions, for which corroboration is sought, as in

(12) The war in Vietnam is terrible, isn’t it?

While there are of course other possible interpretations of a sentence like this, one possibility is that the speaker has a particular answer in mind – ‘yes’ or ‘no’ – but is reluctant to state it baldly. It is my impression, though I do not have precise statistical evidence, that this sort of tag question is much more apt to be used by women than by men. If this is indeed true, why is it true?

These sentence-types provide a means whereby a speaker can avoid committing himself, and thereby avoid coming into conflict with the addressee. The problem is that, by so doing, a speaker may also give the impression of not being really sure of himself, of looking to the addressee for confirmation, even of having no views of his own. This last criticism is, of course, one often levelled at women. One wonders how much of it reflects a use of language that has been imposed on women from their earliest years.

Related to this special use of a syntactic rule is a widespread difference perceptible in women’s intonational patterns. There is a peculiar sentence intonation-pattern, found in English as far as I know only

among women, which has the form of a declarative answer to a question, and is used as such, but has the rising inflection typical of a yes-no question, as well as being especially hesitant. The effect is as though one were seeking confirmation, though at the same time the speaker may be the only one who has the requisite information.

- (13) (A) When will dinner be ready?
 (B) Oh ... around six o'clock... ?

It is as though (B) were saying, 'Six o'clock, if that's OK with you, if you agree'. (A) is put in the position of having to provide confirmation, and (B) sounds unsure. Here we find unwillingness to assert an opinion carried to an extreme. One likely consequence is that these sorts of speech patterns are taken to reflect something real about character and play a part in not taking a woman seriously or trusting her with any real responsibilities, since 'she can't make up her mind', and 'isn't sure of herself'. And here again we see that people form judgments about other people on the basis of superficial linguistic behavior that may have nothing to do with inner character, but has been imposed upon the speaker, on pain of worse punishment than not being taken seriously.

Such features are probably part of the general fact that women's speech sounds much more 'polite' than men's. One aspect of politeness is as we have just described: leaving a decision open, not imposing your mind, or views, or claims, on anyone else. Thus a tag-question is a kind of polite statement, in that it does not force agreement or belief on the addressee. A request may be in the same sense a polite command, in that it does not overtly require obedience, but rather suggests something be done as a favor to the speaker. An overt order (as in an imperative) expresses the (often impolite) assumption of the speaker's superior position to the addressee, carrying with it the right to enforce compliance, whereas with a request the decision on the face of it is left up to the addressee. (The same is true of suggestions – here, the implication is not that the addressee is in danger if he does not comply – merely that he will be glad if he does. Once again, the decision is up to the addressee, and a suggestion therefore is politer than an order.) The more particles in a sentence that reinforce the notion that it is a request, rather than an order, the politer the result. The sentences of

(14) illustrate these points: (14) (a) is a direct order; (b) and (c) simple requests, and (d) and (e) compound requests.

- (14) (a) Close the door.
 (b) Please close the door.
 (c) Will you close the door?
 (d) Will you please close the door?
 (e) Won't you close the door?

Let me first explain why (e) has been classified as a compound request. (A sentence like *Won't you please close the door* would then count as a doubly compound request.) A sentence like (14) (c) is close in sense to 'Are you willing to close the door?' According to the normal rules of polite conversation, to agree that you are willing is to agree to do the thing asked of you. Hence inquiry functions as a request, leaving the decision up to the willingness addressee. Phrasing it as a positive question makes the (implicit) that a 'yes' answer will be forthcoming. Sentence (14) (d) is more or (c) because it combines them: Please indicating that to accede something for the speaker, and will you, as noted, suggesting that has the final decision. If, now, the question is phrased with a (14) (e), the speaker seems to suggest the stronger likelihood of a negative response from the addressee. Since the assumption is then that the addressee is that much freer to refuse, (14) (e) acts as a more polite request than (14) (c) or (d): (c) and (d) put the burden of refusal on the addressee, as (e) does not.

Given these facts, one can see the connection between tag questions and tag-orders and other requests. In all these cases, the speaker is not committed as with a simple declarative or affirmative. And the more one compounds a request, the more characteristic it is of women's speech, the less of men's. A sentence that begins *Won't you please* (without special emphasis on *please*) seems to me at least to have a distinctly unmasculine sound. Little girls are indeed taught to talk like little ladies, in that their speech is in many ways more polite than that of boys or men, and the reason for this is that politeness involves an absence of a strong statement, and women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements.