

There has been a significant amount of research conducted examining the existence of a set of speech characteristics used primarily by female English speakers (Lakoff 1973, Gal 1995). The linguistic technique of “hedging”, for example, is often considered (Lakoff 1973, Coates 1996, Swacker 1975) to be characteristic of feminine speech. This technique utilizes phrases like “I mean”, and “sort of” in order to mitigate the potential threat of the utterance to follow. Another example of a stereotypically “feminine” characteristic is the adherence to standard language, as demonstrated by an aversion to profanity and non-standard forms (ex: ain’t) as well as a tendency towards standard grammar and conventional politeness.

The current study examines the prevalence of ‘women’s features’ as well as ‘men’s features’ in contemporary discourse among a community of college students in order to explore potential evidence of a shift from gendered forms in women’s speech to more neutral forms. Specifically, discourse samples were collected from natural speech settings and analyzed for the prevalence of two types of features identified in previous literature as having strong gendered associations: use of mitigation and adherence to standard forms.

Both mitigation and adherence to standard forms have been suggested to be characteristic of feminine speech. Mitigation is used by speakers in order to lessen the potential face- threat or negative impact their utterance may have on their interlocutor, and includes both politeness and hedging. Adherence to standard forms is a characteristic of women’s speech that has been demonstrated in several ways. Here, I focus on supposed lack of profanity. By collecting naturally-occurring speech from the population in question, and analyzing samples for the presence of gendered linguistic features, we can demonstrate the manner in which these speakers construct their identity linguistically by drawing on, or avoiding, language ideologies linked to gender norms.

### References

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