

An investigation into how gender influences the way people of different ages communicate.

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Introduction and Research Focus

My investigation will centre on whether males and females talk differently, and if they do, what effect age has on this. I will focus on the language of males and females, as the topic is becoming increasingly relevant in our society, and by combining it with age in my investigation, I am intrigued to see if there is greater divergence in the speech of boys and girls as their ignorance decreases and they become more aware of what gender means in the modern world. I expect to find that the younger children's language differs more due to gender as 17 year olds are more aware of the stereotypes and expectations of their gender than 8 year olds, and therefore will understand that they do not have to conform to these, especially with the many campaigns that are running at the moment that promote gender equality, such as the HeForShe campaign launched by the UN. Furthermore, linking to conformity, it will be interesting to see if the older children are more aware of the difference between gender and sex, and whether this effects how they act and speak.

A02
clearly
connected
with
A03

Pre-use
A03
awareness

Therefore, I predict that the younger girls will use more adjectives, descriptive language (in particular adverbial phrases) and politeness features than their male counterparts whereas the older girls will use roughly the same amount as the older boys. I am interested to see if the 1975 research of Robin Lakoff is still relevant or not, and will see if my data proves or disproves it.

A01 +
A02

I also think that the older girls will speak more frequently and for longer periods of time than the older boys, whilst the younger girls will be more frequently interrupted and overlapped by the younger boys. This is supported by the research of Deborah Tannen's difference theory (1990).

→ with
explaining
why
(A02)

Lastly, I predict that the younger girls will use more inclusive language, especially the use of inclusive pronouns such as 'we' to engage the other member of the conversation, which was suggested by Hirschman in 1973, whilst this may not be as obvious or necessary with the older children. I will refer to Deborah Cameron's recent research into whether men and women really do speak differently (2007).

No. of A02 sources considered

Methodology

For my data, I required 4 transcripts which I needed to collect myself. Two needed to be of children aged 8 and then the other two needed to be of children aged 17. I chose these ages as Deborah Cameron states that "Women's language and general personalities and interests change between 5th and 6th grade" (the US equivalent of years 6 and 7), therefore this change will have happened in between the ages of 8 and 17. In all transcripts, I wanted one male and one female, in order to allow me to focus on the way different sexes communicate. The transcripts of the 8 year olds were collected in a primary school and the transcripts of the 17 year olds were collected at college. Both educational institutions are located in Surrey which will keep variation due to location to a minimum. I provided each pair with a photograph and a set of three questions to act as a prompt. This was to ensure that all pairs started off discussing the same stimulus, and also because I was concerned that the younger children might be intimidated due to my age difference and the fact that I was an unknown figure to the children. I was present during all recordings, however I did not speak and told all participants to act as though I was not there, although this may not have been very reliable, and may have affected my data. There was also no opportunity for the participants to talk to each other about what the recording was about, and I checked that none of them had seen the picture before, so I am certain that the responses I recorded were the participants' genuine first

Pre-use
A02/3
justification

limitations
addressed
(A03)

reactions to the picture. The changeable variables in my data collection were the age and gender of the participants, because these factors are the focus of my investigation.

Section 1-Analysis- Semantics and Lexis

Interestingly, in all 4 transcripts, adjectives are used mainly for a descriptive purpose, such as "noisy", "awesome" and "different" in transcript 1, and "unrealistic", "big" and "expensive" in transcript 4, rather than for a phatic purpose, for example the use of empty adjectives to provide feedback and encouragement to other speakers, which was what I had predicted in my first hypothesis, as Lakoff theorised that female speakers use more empty adjectives in their speech (1975). This could be because of the niche context of my transcripts; all speakers had to discuss the same photo, which naturally meant that adjectives would be used with frequency to describe what they could see, and overall meant that if adjective use was affected by gender, the effects are not evident here. In fact, the 8 year old boys actually use more adjectives than the girls. This disproves Lakoff's 1975 research, and possibly shows that it is outdated, although more data would be needed in order show whether this outcome is correct for the majority of 8 year olds or just the ones involved in my investigation. Nevertheless, the 17 year old girls do use more descriptive adjectives than the boys, which possibly suggests that there is divergence between the ways the two genders speak as they get older. Interestingly, the younger children don't use any phatic or empty adjectives, but the 17 year old boys use 2 more than the girls, which is the opposite of what I had predicted. The context of the recording may have influenced this as their speech largely had a referential purpose rather than phatic, which is an area where it would be expected to find empty adjectives. This shows that the out-dated theories made by linguists such as Robin Lakoff are not always relevant to today's society, and developments in gender equality have meant men and women feel less pressure to speak in a certain way.

functions of AO1 addressed linked to AO2

challenge of AO2

awareness of precise context (AO3)

Age	Gender	Descriptive adjectives	Phatic/empty adjectives
8 year olds	Boys	7	0
	Girls	4	0
17 year olds	Boys	8	3
	Girls	9	1

Lakoff also stated that women use weaker expletives than men, which is demonstrated in my data. In transcript 4, the 17 year old boy uses the expletive "fuck me" when unsure of what to say. Even though language such as this is deemed inappropriate in many contexts of society, the speaker has clearly deemed it appropriate for this context, possibly due to the fact that the only audience was me and another 17 year old girl, so there wasn't a risk of him offending either of us by using this language. Therefore, this language isn't taboo in this context, however is still considered an expletive. The female speaker in the same transcript doesn't use any expletives, even if she had an opportunity to. For example, in response to a question, she replies "no don't be silly". This statement would have been equally if not more effective in achieving its desired purpose if the

AO1 precisely linked to AO3

speaker had used an expletive of even a low degree of severity, however, she chose not to. This complies with Lakoff's (1975) research and suggests that maybe some areas of it are still relevant and reflective of today's society, for example that women will avoid coarse language of expletives.

Section 2-Analysis-Topic Control and Non-fluency

	Boy interrupts Girl	Girl interrupts Boy	Average
Transcript 1	8	4	6
Transcript 2	2	5	3.5
Transcript 3	8	3	5.5
Transcript 4	5	2	3.5
Average	11.5	7	

After completing my statistical analysis, I have found that in 3 out of the 4 transcripts, the boys interrupt more often than the girls. Furthermore, in the one transcript where the girls interrupt more, most of the interruptions were overlaps, where the female uses positive reinforcement, as a form of back channelling, such as "yeah" to encourage the male speaker and to indicate that they are paying attention. Whilst the act of interrupting speech is considered traditionally masculine (Zimmermann and West, 1975), the purpose and intent of the interruptions is something that complies with Deborah Tannen's difference theory (1990), as by overlapping the male's speech with positive words like "yeah", it is showing that the purpose of their speech is to build relationships, which is what these overlaps do. This supports the theory that women overlap as an enthusiasm strategy (Coates, 2011). Interestingly, in transcript 3, where the male interrupts more, the majority of his interruptions are for the purpose of positively encouraging the female speaker, and on one occasion, he overlaps her speech but saying "I don't know", which whilst at first may appear as though it doesn't have a clear purpose in the conversation (as it is in response to what could have been a rhetorical question) but it could also be useful in the fact that it lets the speaker know the listener is paying attention and is engaged in what they're saying. However, if Labov's theory that men use more covert prestige than women is correct (1966), then this could just be an example of a male speaker using covert prestige, as the speaker may be trying to act as though they are not engaged by the task, when in reality they do know the answer.

Developed argument

→ AOR needs tighter embedding

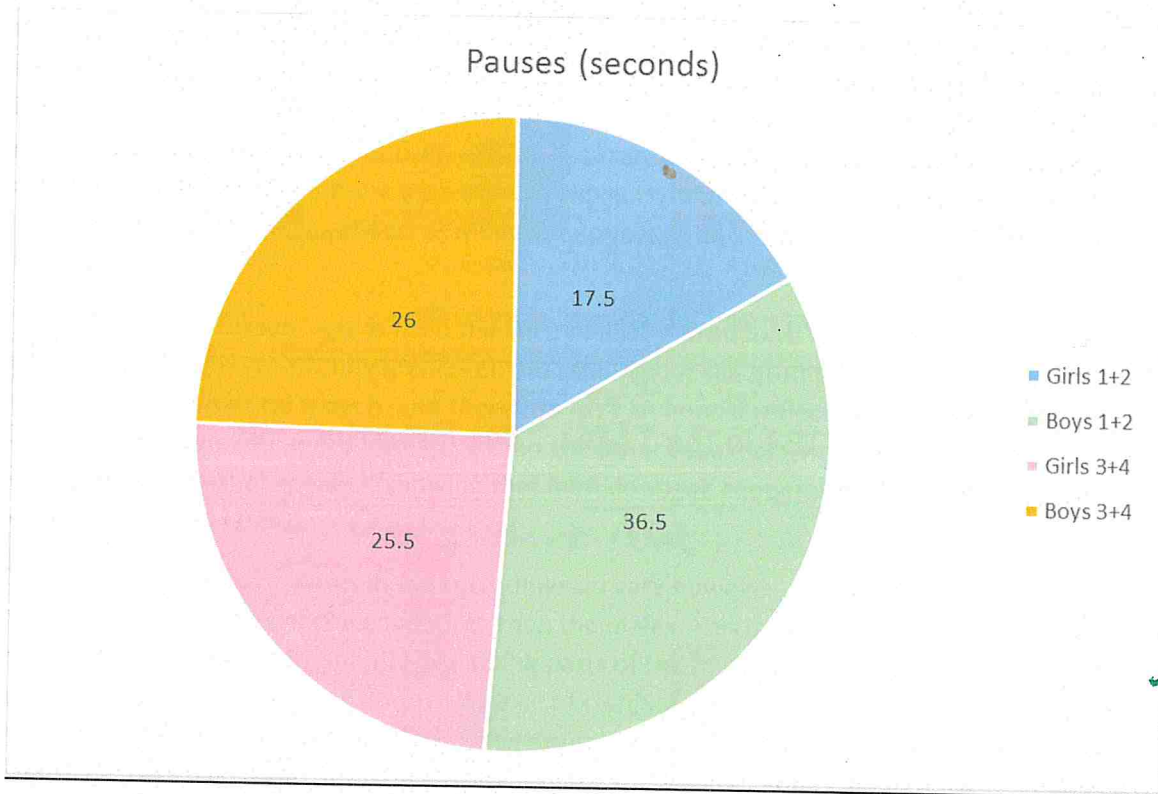
In terms of how age affects interruptions, both age groups seem to interrupt or overlap speech on average the same amount of times, and the interruptions seem to be of equal purpose and nature, which leads me to believe that frequency of interruption has more to do with the sex of the speaker, or the context, than their age.

Focussing on other non-fluency features, such as pausing, the male speakers in my data pause for a total longer period of time than the female speakers, despite their age. At first, this appears to

Precise AOR understanding of spoken discourse analysis

contradict my hypothesis that the younger girls would speak less than the younger boys, which is supported by a study conducted by Barbara and Gene Eakins, which found that over 7 faculty meetings at 7 different universities, men spoke, on average, for about 7 seconds longer than their female counterparts in each individual turn. However, whilst my data disagrees with the common myth that women are more talkative than men, it shows that women appear to be more fluent when talking than men are. Overall, the younger children pause more often than the older children, showing that with age, children become more competent speakers, and tend to use non-fluency features that aren't intentional less often.

useful A02 to support



The conversation went off topic in both transcripts 3 and 4 (17 year olds), but not at all with the 8 year olds, and while the younger children did not deviate from the prompts I provided, the older children didn't acknowledge them vocally at all. This shows a greater independence while communicating at an older age, which would have been gained through age and experience, as older children are obviously expected to have more conversations at a fluent level without adult assistance, where-as the younger children may still depend on adults for help articulating their ideas. Coates stated then men tend to topic jump more than women (1986) however this isn't supported by my data as in all accounts of shifting to a topic unrelated to the task, half were initiated by the male speaker and half by the female. Furthermore, in the 8 year olds transcripts, the female speakers are consistently the ones who shift the topic, usually using polite interrogative utterances such as "and then (.) what do you think (...)", in transcript 1 which gives the implication that the new topic is linked to the old one some way, through the use of the coordinating conjunction "and" in transcript 2, there is the use of the modal verb "shall", which not only initiates a topic shift, but also explicitly signposts it to the listener, showing women's cooperative attitude towards speech (Maltz and Borker 1982).

Good challenge of A02

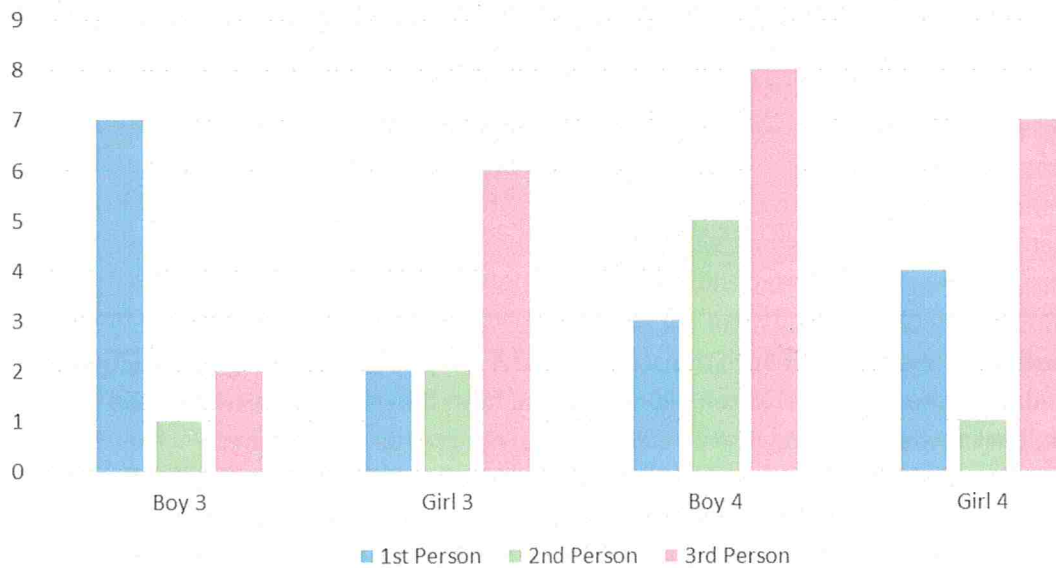
Precise application of grammar (A01)

Section 3-Analysis- Grammar

Pronoun Use in the 8 Year Olds Transcript



Pronoun Use in the 17 Year Olds Transcript



In my hypothesis, I stated that I thought females would use more inclusive pronouns, and at first, it appears that the younger males and females use the same amount of the inclusive pronoun 'we'; both genders use it 5 times each. However, the context of this use is important. On both occasions that the boys use 'we', it is repeated as part of a redundant repetition or a self-correction, for example, "we just (.) we just answered that" and "we we didn (.) we don't have planes like that". Therefore in reality, the 8 year old males only actually use the pronoun 'we' once each, and twice overall. In contrast, the female speaker uses the first person plural pronoun for the same purpose three out of the five times she uses it. Twice, 'we' is used as part of an interrogative statement, "shall we go on to (...)" in reference to the prompts I had provided. Not only does this move the conversation forwards, and clearly makes sure that both of them have finished speaking about that

AOI considered precisely with AOI

particular prompt, it also shows an awareness and engagement with the subject, speaker, and content of the conversation.

Whist in the 8 year olds transcript, use of the 1st person pronoun (singular and plural) is by far the most frequently used, in the 17 year olds transcript, the use of the 3rd person pronoun (singular and plural) is the most used pronoun. Similarly to the 8 year olds, the 17 year olds use the pronoun 'it' frequently throughout the transcript, therefore, I would suggest that this is due to the context of the recordings and the task they were set. In order to describe a picture, which is partly what they were asked to do, participants would need to use the 3rd person object pronoun to point out elements of the picture and describe what they can see. Because of this, I don't think age or gender had much effect on the use of the pronoun. Although, the 3rd person plural pronoun 'they' is used a total of 6 times in transcript 4, and only once in the transcripts of the younger children. Even though this is an interesting contrast, 'they' isn't used at all in the transcript of the other 17 year olds talking, which suggests to me that this is more a part of the idiolect of the two speakers in transcript 4, rather than a factor relating to age or gender, as it doesn't appear at all in transcript 4 (the other 17 year old transcript).

Precise, inclusive, balanced analysis of A01.

The 2nd person pronoun 'you' is used the least of all the pronouns. However when it is, the majority of its uses are when the younger children are reading out the prompts, meaning that it isn't a part of the participants' natural speech, and therefore isn't an honest reflection of their language use, Boy 4 uses this pronoun with more frequency than the other speakers, with the purpose of prompting and questioning the other speaker, showing that men do speak cooperatively, and challenging Tannen's difference theory (1990). Challenge of A02.

could be reconstructed more clearly (A01)

The uses of adverbial phrases in the recordings do vary however, with the female speakers using vastly more adverbials of place and time than the males. This is more evident in the 8-year-old's transcript; the females frequently describing parts of the image using adverbials like "planes going over", which add extra detail for the purpose of clarifying to the male listener exactly what they're referencing to, even though paralinguistic features and gestures were used to assist anyway. This clarity of speech links to Tannen's 1990 Difference theory, that states women use rapport talk to build and foster relationships, and in the case of the 8 year old girls, by ensuring that what they're saying is clear to the listener and that both members of the conversation have the same understanding at that moment, they do not threaten the positive face of the 8 year old boys (Brown and Levinson, 1987), which is expected of female speech (Janet Holmes, 1995)

A02 & A01 explained in light of A03

Assured application of A02.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I don't think age has a very large impact on the way genders communicate, therefore disagreeing with my investigation title. Whilst boys and girls do communicate differently at different ages, I don't think this is because of a greater awareness of gender or the way gender is viewed in society, but mainly down to the fact that their vocabulary has grown and they have had more experience at communicating. Despite this, I have still discovered some interesting variations in the way the genders speak at 8 and at 17. Overall my data and analysis has provided me with contrasting results in relation to my original hypotheses. My first hypothesis that younger girls would use more adjectives than the males was disproved by my data; however, the older boys and girls used roughly the same amount of adjectives, which does correlate with my hypothesis. My second hypothesis was also proved wrong, as the boys interrupted more in all cases, regardless of age. My final hypothesis was proved with respect to the younger girls overall using more inclusive language than any other participants; however, it was challenged by the fact that in Transcript 2, girl 2 uses the 1st person pronoun most often, and in transcript 4, boy 4 uses the third person pronoun the most.

clear links to proving/disproving hypotheses

use of A03 to support more clearly with A03

Evaluation

I thought I had a good quantity of data, which provided me with enough data to prove or disprove my hypothesis. If I were to collect my data again, I wouldn't have narrowed down the subject of conversation as much as I ended up doing, as I think this may have had a greater effect in some cases on the language used than gender or age did. I also think if I had used a larger group of participants (2 males and 2 females), I would have been able to see more clearly the way that the genders interact with each other. However one of the benefits of having the participants discuss in groups of two was that each speaker had more opportunity to speak; there was less chance of any of the speakers being interrupted, and therefore I think utterances tended to be longer than if there were more participants speaking at one time.

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Appendix

Transcript 1

Girl 1: what can you see in this photo (.) well I can see=

Boy 1: = I can see a (.) some spaceships errr around that (.) sort of (.) thing and then //uh

Girl 1:

//city//

Boy 1:

road (.) and (.) and then (1.) uh (.) I can see tower bridge whatever it's called

//like (.) a

Girl 1: (laughs) tower bridge (laughs) um (laughs)

Boy 1: and it's going across a (.) a (.) wide river (.) and there's (.) some (.) uh (.) future like (.) sort of like future // planes

Girl 1: // planes yeah