

- **Language and gender
(and context...)**

Background preparation:

- *Kaplan (2016), Ch 8, “Women talk more than men”*

0. Today's objectives

After today's class, you should be able to:

- Explain some weaknesses of attempts to explain gender-specific differences in language use in terms of biological differences
- Give examples of ways in which social factors can interact with or even create gender-specific language use patterns
- Use examples to debunk the claim that women's language is naturally or inherently more polite / less direct / more standard than men's

1. Warm-up

- Here are some big-picture questions:
 - Does gender affect language?
 - If so, why?
- But there is lots and lots to **unpack** here

1. Warm-up

Discussion

- What is '**gender**'?
 - Are there potentially relevant factors that Kaplan's discussion doesn't incorporate?
- If it turns out to be the case that people of different genders use language differently, what are some **reasons** why this could be?

1. Warm-up

Debriefing

- What is '**gender**'?
 - Are there potentially relevant factors that Kaplan's discussion doesn't incorporate?
- Much of Kaplan's discussion treats gender as a **binary** distinction
 - Are there methodological reasons for this?
 - We can discuss other perspectives and factors

1. Warm-up

- Possible reasons for gender effects in language use?
 - **Biological** differences
 - Differences in a **culture's expectations** for appropriate behavior in men and women
 - Differences in the **roles** that men and women typically play in particular situations
 - Is it *gender*, or ***power***?
 - Other...
- Research on language and gender is complex; there are a great many factors to control for

2. Biological differences?

- Kaplan (2016: 159) on **biological differences** as a cause of gender differences in language use (emphasis added)
 - Although we can't rule it out as a possibility, this hypothesis turns out to be very **difficult to prove** because it's so hard to **control for social factors** that might also lead to differences between women and men.
 - If community A believes that women naturally behave one way, while community B believes that they are naturally the opposite, we can't avoid the conclusion that **social expectations play a crucial role** in what men and women actually do.

2. Biological differences?

- Even expected differences caused by **anatomy** do not explain all gender differences in phonetics
 - Example: **Vowel** differences and **height** differences between men and women

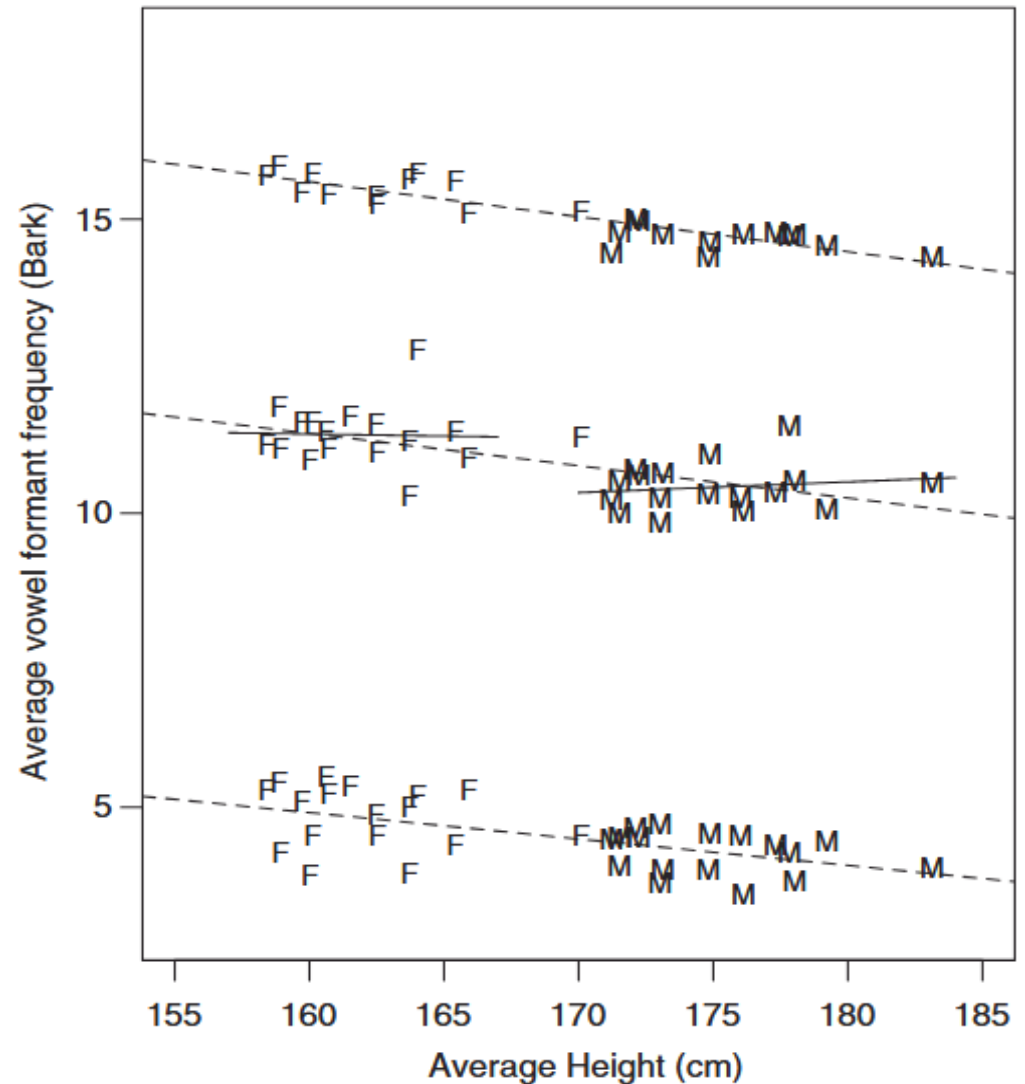
Johnson (2006) — [Link to article](#) for more graphics and details
- Brief background: Vowels have characteristic acoustic signatures called **formants**
 - Formant values are affected by vocal-tract length
 - On average, men are taller than women
 - So, we would expect men's formants to be lower

2. Biological differences?

- How formant values correlate with height in 17 languages

(Johnson 2006: 489, Fig. 3)

“The lowest trend line shows the linear regression fit between the first formant F1 and average height. The middle trend line shows the regression fit between F2 and height, and the highest line shows the fit between F3 and height. Separate fits for male and female F2 frequency are drawn with solid lines.”



2. Biological differences?

Johnson's analysis:

(Johnson 2006: 487)

- “The key observations to draw from this figure are that average body height is pretty well correlated with with F3 frequency, but that F1 and especially F2 are not so predictable from height.”
- “...the slope of the regression line of F2 for men was positive, indicating a tendency for lower F2 for men with *shorter* vocal tracts!”
- “People (perhaps especially men) perform gender.”

3. Social factors

Discussion

- What are the ***difference*** and ***dominance*** models of gender and communication?

3. Social factors

- **Difference model** — Girls and boys grow up in (somewhat) separate social groups and learn different cultures, including language behavior
- **Dominance model** — Conventional male and female roles typically involve a difference in relative power, and language use by men and women reflects this power difference
- Kaplan (2016: 160):
Neither of these models can be the whole story
 - Why not?

3. Social factors

Neither of these models can be the *whole* story

- Difference model
 - Underplays the fact that women and men use a variety of linguistic tools, strategies, and styles
 - Minimizes the effect of social power
- Dominance model
 - Danger of oversimplifying: Not all gender differences in language are related to power

Still, both models usefully call attention to **context**

4. Are views on w/m differences universal?

Discussion

- What are some claims we often hear about language differences between women and men?

4. Are views on w/m differences universal?

- What are some claims we often hear about language differences between women and men?
 - Women have better verbal skills (earlier acquisition, better test performance, ...)
 - Women talk superficially and more while men talk less but more deeply
 - Women are “more polite” than men
 - Women’s language is “more correct” than men’s

5. Are women more 'polite' than men?

- 'Conventional wisdom' in Western societies: women are more polite / less directly aggressive than men
 - Sometimes viewed negatively ('negotiate more aggressively!')
 - Sometimes viewed positively ('we need more cooperation in upper management!')

5. Are women more 'polite' than men?

Discussion

- What are some cross-cultural comparison cases discussed by Kaplan where these beliefs are changed or reversed?

5. Are women more 'polite' than men?

Rural Madagascar (Keenan 1996)

- The culture values indirectness / avoiding confrontation, especially in *kabary* (a formal mode of speech)
 - The ability to criticize in a subtle way is seen as highly skillful
 - Women and men alike believe that only men are skilled enough for *kabary*; women are too direct and unsophisticated. (Kaplan 2016: 161)

5. Are women more 'polite' than men?

Rural Madagascar (Keenan 1996)

- Women take on social tasks that require direct or aggressive speech
 - Bargaining in the market
 - Cases where direct criticism is desired

5. Are women more 'polite' than men?

Gapun, Papua New Guinea (Kulick 1993)

- Women are seen as “disruptive, divisive, begrudging, antisocial, and emotionally excessive” (Kulick 1993: 512)
- A specifically female speech genre: the *kros*
 - “Long, angry monologue” spoken from inside house
 - Example provided by Kaplan (from Kulick) shows heavy use of vulgar and profane vocabulary
 - If a man wants a *kros* delivered, he will typically need to have his wife do it for him

5. Are women more 'polite' than men?

- What can we conclude from these examples?
 - Are women biologically programmed to be more (or less) polite than men?
 - If not, where does women's tendency to be more (or less) polite than men come from?
- Are there any common patterns or common factors in the three contexts compared here?
 - Western view of women as indirect, polite
 - Madagascar
 - Gapun, PNG

6. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

- Often, women do use fewer nonstandard forms than men (examples reviewed in Labov 1990 [[article link](#)])
 - What are some of the factors behind this phenomenon?
 - Is this always the case?

6. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

Overt vs. covert prestige

- Communities and individuals often show **variation** between standard, nonstandard forms

Example:

- Standard: *running* with [-iŋ] (or [-ɪŋ])
 - Nonstandard: *runnin'* with [-ən] (or [-ɪn])
 - Note: Why is "g-dropping" a somewhat inaccurate label for this pattern of variation?
- Most people use both variants, depending on context

6. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

Overt vs. covert prestige

- Study by Trudgill (1983) in Norwich, England
More of the prestige variant was found...
 - from middle-class vs. lower-class speakers
 - in more formal contexts
 - from women than from men
- These results themselves are pretty typical

6. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

Overt vs. covert prestige

- Interesting results from an explicit question: which variant do *you* use more often?
 - Women tended to **over-report** prestige variant
 - Men tended to **under-report** prestige variant
- What does this suggest about what women and men value in language?
 - Does this change our perspective on the claim that women speak 'more correctly' than men?

7. More examples: Social factors

Some bonus slides with more examples

Identity and the choice among language variants

- Study by Eckert (2011) of language use among high school students in a Detroit suburb (research carried out in the 1980s) [note that the group names are the students' own]
 - Jocks: oriented toward academic success and leaving the Detroit area; typically middle-class
 - Burnouts: oriented toward the local community and not toward school; typically working-class

7. More examples: Social factors

Identity and the choice among language variants

- Students indicated their identities/group affiliations through language (among other ways)
 - Standard vs. nonstandard pronunciation variants
 - Jocks tended to use standard variants and burnouts tended to use nonstandard variants
- Were girls or boys more standard?

7. More examples: Social factors

Identity and the choice among language variants

- Punchline is: For certain pronunciations,
 - Jock girls were **more standard** than jock boys (the frequent pattern)
 - But—Burnout girls were **more nonstandard** than burnout boys
- What does this suggest about the typical pattern of ‘more correct’ language use by women?

7. More examples: Social factors

- Example: “Uptalk”

“[Uptalk anxiety](#),” by Mark Liberman at Language Log

8. Tips for Group 6 (Ch 8 case study)

To consider when reading a case-study:

- What gender-specific pattern is being studied?
 - How is it being studied? (What do we count?)
- How is gender itself defined for the study?
- Are there social/cultural/context (power...) factors involved? Are they controlled for in the study design and/or analysis?