

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

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*Background preparation:*

- *Kaplan (2016), Ch 7, “Women talk more than men”, sections 8.1 and 8.2*

# 1. Gender and language

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

# 1. Gender and language

## 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. Gender and language

## 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. Gender and language

- Possible reasons for gender effects in language use?
  - **Biological** differences in the brain
  - 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

# 1. Gender and language

- Why is Kaplan dubious about 'biological differences in the brain' as a general explanation of language differences between men and women?
- What are the ***difference*** and ***dominance*** models of language and gender?

# 1. Gender and language

- What are the ***difference*** and ***dominance*** models?
  - **Difference model** — Girls and boys grow up in 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?

# 1. Gender and language

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

Both models usefully call attention to **context**



## 2. Some “Western” “conventional wisdom”

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

## 2. Some “Western” “conventional wisdom”

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

### 3. 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!')

### 3. Are women more 'polite' than men?

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

### 3. Are women more 'polite' than men?

Rural Madagascar (Keenan 1996)

- 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)

### 3. 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

### 3. 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

### 3. 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



## 4. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

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

## 4. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

### Overt vs. covert prestige

- Variation often exists between standard, nonstandard forms — here, [-iŋ] (or [-ɪŋ]) vs. [-ən], as in *runnin(g)*
  - Note: Why is “g-dropping” a somewhat inaccurate label for this pattern of variation?
- Most people use both variants, depending on context

## 4. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

### Overt vs. covert prestige

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

## 4. 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?

## 4. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

### 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

## 4. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

### Identity and the choice among language variants

- Students indicated their identities/group affiliations through language (among other ways)
  - 'Conservative' (standard) vs. 'progressive' (nonstandard) pronunciation variants
  - Jocks tended to use conservative variants and burnouts tended to use progressive variants
- Were girls or boys more conservative?
  - [Link to 1998 version of Eckert's book chapter](#)

## 4. Do women speak more 'correctly' than men?

Identity and the choice among language variants

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

## 5. More examples

- Example: “Uptalk”

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

- Example: Vowel differences and height differences between men and women — an analysis by Johnson (2006)
  - [Link to article](#) via UNC Libraries



## 6. General discussion

- What are the main take-home points of Kaplan's discussion in sections 8.1–8.2?