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**WOMEN'S LANGUAGE IN *WOMEN IN A MEETING* AS ILLUSTRATED  
BY ALEXANDRA PETRI**

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**Abstract**

This article mainly reports a research focused on women's language features in women in a meeting as illustrated by Alexandra Petri. This research belongs to a qualitative content analysis research. Although it was mostly done using qualitative, quantitative method was also conducted to find the percentage of frequency. The data collected in this research was through transcript of Alexandra Petri's TedTalk video, taken from Youtube, and her *The Washington Post* article. Her TedTalk video was posted on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016, whilst her article was posted prior to that on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2015. The result shows that out of the ten women's language features, only seven were used: lexical hedges or fillers, followed by super-polite form, emphatic stress, rising intonation, intensifier, empty adjectives, and tag question. The absent features were hyper-correct grammar, avoidance of strong wear word, and precise color term. The utterances demonstrated by Petri tends to use lexical hedges and super-polite form more, which shows how uncertain and unconfident women are.

Keywords: TedTalk, *The Washington Post*, women in a meeting, women's language

**Introduction**

Language is identified as a tool for human beings to communicate with each other, as well as to be distinguished from animal's communication system. According to Aitschison (2012), language is made of symbols and used routinely to share information to one another. It has its purpose as a communicative function. With language as the basic way for humans to communicate, Holmes (2013) has found that there are various stimuluses that prompted the way of people talk.

The idea of gender affecting language speakers also came up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that caused an attraction towards anthropologists and linguists (Li, 2014). It is not until 1973 that Robin T. Lakoff, a well-known linguists, published *Language and Woman's Place*. Her study describes of that differences between language spoken by men and women. She concluded that women undergo discrimination even in the linguistic area and there are distinct features found in

their style of speech (Lakoff, 1973). One of the characteristics found was that women are seen to be more talkative than men and spend most of their day gossiping (Pebrianti, 2013).

Another argument collected from Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003), later supported by Pakzadian & Tootkaboni's study (2018), was that the speech difference between men and women surfaces due to the dominance men held over women, who they perceive as subordinate. Talbot (2010), however, counters this statement and states that the dominance behaviour men seem to possess is elucidated as a 'cross-cultural' phenomenon. It is a result of how men and women perceive interaction between them should be, which then causes an imbalance.

Lakoff (1973) claims that those features that differentiate women from men include: the use of lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, 'empty' adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, 'hypercorrect' grammar, 'super polite' forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and empathic stress. In her study, she also states that women's language features showed how subordinate they are with just the way of how they spoke.

The use of lexical hedges or fillers, for example, is used due to women's lack of confidence as argued by Lakoff (1973). Lexical hedges here are defined by Lakoff (1973, cited from Holmes, 2013) as "a number of linguistic features which were unified by their function of expressing lack of confidence." In addition, hedges are used as well as a way for a speaker to soften their utterances (Mohamad & Sahib, 2014). In a way, it has come its way to how women speak in a meeting as proposed by Alexandra Petri in her *The Washington Post* article as well as her Ted-Talk video entitled 'How to Speak Woman'.

### ***Women's Language Features***

As mentioned above, women's language features are:

#### *Lexical Hedges*

Carli (1990, cited from Svendsen, 2019) proclaims that the perception of how women should behave in front of man pushes women into using tentative language. She describes this as a strategy or a device in order for the speaker to seem subordinate or not to step over their status (p. 949). Thus, Coates (2014) associates it with the use of lexical hedges. She describes the linguistic forms of lexical hedges include:

1. *I think*
2. *I'm sure*
3. *you know*
4. *sort of*
5. *perhaps/maybe*
6. *like, etc.*

However, Coates (2014) argues that even though there have been investigations that proved women use more hedges than men, view of its functions is as important and it doesn't restrict its use only as a sign of weakness.

#### *Tag Questions*

According to Lakoff (1973, cited from Rawanita, 2019), the use of tag question by women is a way of them to reaffirm their statement by asking it again.

An analysis was made by Holmes (1984, cited from Jakobsson, 2010), which states that tag question is divided into that express modal or affective meaning, which softening, and confrontational. He describes referential meaning as to signal doubt or uncertainty (p. 306), as for affective meaning, it functions as a positive politeness device (p. 306). Softening may happen when one wants to soften their critical comment towards another person (Holmes, 2014, p. 307) and for confrontational, it may be used as a force to receive an answer from an uncooperative addressee (p. 307).

Examples of tag question contains:

1. *isn't it*
2. *wasn't it*
3. *right?*
4. *don't we?*

#### *Rising Intonation*

Lakoff (1973, cited from Utari, 2019) in doing her research, finds perceivable change of intonation when women are speaking. A pattern can be found among speakers where an intonation would rise by the end of a sentence, converting an assertion into some sort of a question (Amanda, 2017). Therefore, it weakens the statement and the speaker is seemed as though in search of a confirmation (Utari, 2019). An example for rising intonation for a clear picture is “*it's Monday?*”

#### *Empty Adjectives*

Talbot (2010) in explaining empty hedges as an affective adjectives. She suggests that women use affective meaning words (having to do with expressing feelings). It is also mentioned that empty adjectives are used as a way to express an admiration and/or an emotional reaction towards something. Those adjectives that are marked as feminine include: *adorable, divine, charming, sweet, and lovely*.

#### *Precise Color Terms*

Lakoff (1973) expresses her amuse when seeing a helpless man trying to describe the color of a book-jacket to be ‘lavender’ or ‘mauve’. As it turns out, women are able to classify more precise color terms than men. Men’s point of view of colors is far more limited than those women that they view it as not to be one of their concerns. Different color terms include: *beige, acru, aquamarine, lavender, etc.*

#### *Intensifiers*

Holmes (2014) affirms the use of intensifiers as a boosting device. Its use as a boost and/or to strengthen the intended meaning is mostly used by women, although men still also use it sometimes. Intensifiers include words such as *really, so, such, quite, and very*. However, Lakoff (1973) adds that *so* can also be viewed as a hedge and that “it is supposed to weaken a speaker’s strength of feeling”. For example in the sentence, “*I like him so much!*”

#### *Hyper-correct Grammar*

Women tend to use the standard form of English than men as proposed by Lakoff (1973) and Talbot (2010). Lakoff (1973) relates hyper-correct grammar with

politeness in utterances and it implies a more correct form that it's supposed to be. An early study done by Trudgill (1972, cited from Talbot, 2010, p. 23) also suggests that the cause of that is due to women are more status conscious than men. He also elaborates that women tend to be more socially judged than men, hence making them more sensitive to linguistic norms.

#### *Super-polite Form*

Women prefers a more polite language than men as suggested by Lakoff (1973). It may include excessive use of euphemism, which translates into indirect expression. For example, the use of *passing away* instead of *died*. Lakoff (p. 56) also suggests that by the use of super-polite form then does not push an agreement or belief on the addressee. For example, “*are you willing to close the door?*”

#### *Avoidance of Strong Swear Words*

Profanity or swear is considered as an expression that showed an ardent emotion from a person, therefore it's deemed to be unbecoming for women (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). They also states that anger, raised voice, abusive insults and such are expected when done by men (p. 182). Further, it has become men's habit to use strong interjections and profanities. In additional, Lakoff (1973, cited by Talbot, 2010) connects avoidance of strong swear words as also being polite.

As an example, the replacement of “*shit*” with something more soft, “*oh no!*”, “*oh my God*”, “*goodness*”, etc.

#### *Emphatic Stress*

Women, as observed by Lakoff (1973), use an ‘over-the-top emphasis’ or what she calls as ‘speaking in italics’. She suggests that women like to use this to emphasize more and give strength on their utterance. Amanda (2017) then elaborates this as a way to guarantee the message is received and responded. For further amplification, the word ‘*beautiful*’ in the sentence “*What a beautiful dress!*” is an emphatic stress to highlight on how beautiful the dress is.

#### ***Women in a Meeting***

Petri (2015) claims that ‘woman in a meeting’ has become a language of its own. As it is known, women and men talk in different ways. Those factors include how both are raised distinctively and both occupy their own respective roles in society (Wahyuningsih, 2018). Some differences that can be found in men's language features as Coates (2013) mentions are minimal response, command and directives, swearing and taboo language, and that men are seemingly to interrupt brusquely a conversation than that is women to interrupt a conversation.

With men instinctively using these features in a conversation, women who are naturally wary and are seen to be subordinate, chose to stay silent most of the time. However, when women chose to talk like men, more direct and blunt, others will perceive them as being ‘unreasonably angry’ (Petri, TEDx Talks, 2016, 3:23). Consequently, Petri (2015) thinks that there is a second language that women use called ‘woman in a meeting’.

In her TedTalk video, Petri (TEDx Talks, 2016, 3:49) describes ‘woman in a meeting’ as:

“...where you take your thought and you crochet a verbal sweater for it. So the edges don’t bump anybody, or poke them or make them uncomfortable.”

Here, the researcher will try to analyse those women’s language features that are used in ‘woman in a meeting’ from Petri’s TedTalk video as well as from her *The Washington Post* article.

### Method

For this research, the researcher conducted a qualitative research and the method of data collection was content analysis. This use of method is an attempt to seek deeper understanding of the problem by identifying several categories (Bengtsson, 2016). Although this research mostly used qualitative method, the researcher also used a few quantitative method in order to find the frequency of occurrence that leads to the percentage of women’s language features found. As asserted by Denscombe (2010), Hsieh & Shannon (2005), and White & Marsh (2006), the data collected in content analysis include the use of sounds, pictures, a writing, interviews, and/or videos.

The source data collected in this research are from a transcript of Alexandra Petri’s TedTalk video, taken from Youtube, and her *The Washington Post* article. Her TedTalk video was posted on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016, whilst her article was posted prior to that on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2015.

The instruments that are used by the researcher were documents and observation sheet/table. Table 1. will show the observation made from Alexandra Petri’s utterances of woman in a meeting from her video and Table 2. will show Alexandra Petri’s translation of famous sentences into phrases a woman would have to use in a meeting.

**Table 4. Observation sheet from TedTalk video template**

No.	Utterances	Minutes	EA	I	LH	TQ	HG	RI	SF	SW	ES	CT	Total
1													
2													
Total													

### Abbreviations:

- EA : Empty Adjectives
- I : Intensifier
- LH : Lexical Hedges
- TQ : Tag Question
- HG : Hyper-correct Grammar
- RI : Rising Intonation
- SF : Super-polite Form
- SW : Avoidance Strong Swear Word
- ES : Emphatic Stress
- CT : Precise Color Term

**Table 5. Observation sheet from *The Washington Post* article template**

No.	Utterances	EA	I	LH	TQ	HG	RI	SF	SW	ES	CT	Total
1												
2												
	Total											

After identifying and grouping the features in the video and the article, the researcher classified them and counted the total number of each occurrence. The result will be then found on Table 3. Not only the total number, but also the percentage of its occurrence.

**Table 6. Women’s language features used in women in meeting template**

No.	Women’s Language Features	TedTalk Video	<i>The Washington Post</i> Article	Total	Percentage
1	Empty Adjectives				
2	Intensifier				
3	Lexical Hedges				
4	Tag Question				
5	Hyper-correct Grammar				
6	Rising Intonation				
7	Super-polite form				
8	Avoidance of Strong Swear Word				
9	Emphatic Stress				
10	Precise Color Term				
	Total				

## Findings and Discussion

### *TedTalk Video*

From the TedTalk video in Youtube, posted on the February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016, the researcher found five features that was used by Alexandra Petri when giving examples of how women talk in a meeting. Those utterances that she gave was her own ‘translation’ from famous phrases that men would typically say. The features that the researcher found, as shown in Table. 4, consist of empty adjective [EA], lexical hedges [LH], rising intonation [RI], super-polite form [SF], and emphatic stress [ES].

Famous phrases used as the examples were:

1. “Give me liberty or give me death”
2. “Let my people go!”
3. “I will be heard!”

**Table 4. Observation sheet from TedTalk video**

No.	Utterances	Minutes	EA	I	LH	TQ	HG	RI	SF	SW	ES	CT	Total
1	“ <b>Well [LH]</b> , Dave, <b>I just think [LH]</b> liberty would be <b>terrific [ES]</b> , but	4:11-4:17	✓		✓						✓		3

	of course, the <b>alternative [ES]</b> <b>might [LH]</b> be <b>awful [EA] [ES]</b> ; frankly, <b>just in my</b> <b>opinion [LH]</b> , <b>just</b> <b>[LH]</b> take it for what it’s worth.”										
2	“ <b>Well [LH]</b> , Pharaoh, have you <b>given [ES]</b> any consideration? I don’t want to butt in here, Dave. I <b>just [LH]</b> —if you <b>gave [ES]</b> some consideration to <b>maybe [LH] [ES]</b> <b>not holding</b> <b>people? [RI] Just</b> <b>[LH]</b> a thought. <b>Just [LH]</b> a thought, I don’t know. <b>Maybe</b> <b>[LH]</b> we covered this.”	4:26-4:38	✓		✓		✓		4		
3	“ <b>No, no Dave, you</b> <b>go ahead. [SF]</b> ”	4:50				✓			1		
	Total		1	11	0	0	4	1	0	6	0

### *Empty Adjectives*

Empty adjectives are used as a way to express an admiration and/or an emotional reaction towards something. In the video, the researcher found only 1 empty adjective occurrence and that is *awful*.

### *Lexical Hedges*

Hedges, or fillers which showed uncertainty and reduced the strength of a statement, that can be found in Petri’s TedTalk video were 11 in total. That includes:

- *well* (2)
- *just* (6)
- *might* (1)
- *maybe* (2)

### *Rising Intonation*

Rising intonation is the perceivable change of intonation when women are speaking. A pattern that can be found among speakers where an intonation would rise by the end of a sentence, converting an assertion into some sort of a question. From the video, there was 1 rising intonation that occurred, which was “*if you gave some consideration to maybe not holding people?*”

*Super-polite Form*

The use of super-polite form in the video occurred during the last example that Petri used. It was the famous sentence “*I will be heard!*” that became “*No, no Dave, you go ahead.*” The utterance suggests that the speaker (woman in a meeting) would rather let her male colleague to speak up first before her.

*Emphatic Stress*

Refers to an ‘over-the-top emphasis’ or what Lakoff (1973) calls as ‘speaking in italics’. She suggests that women like to use this to emphasize more and give strength on their utterance. Here in the video, the researcher found 4 of emphatic stress on words that a woman in a meeting was trying to get her message to her male colleague. Those being:

- “...*liberty would be terrific..*”
- “...*the alternative might be awful...*”
- “...*have you given any consideration?*”
- “...*if you gave some consideration...*”

*The Washington Post Article*

From Alexandra Petri’s article on *The Washington Post*, posted on the October 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, the researcher found six features that was used by Alexandra Petri when giving examples of how women talk in a meeting. Those utterances that she gave was her own ‘translation’ from famous phrases that men would typically say. The features that the researcher found, as shown in Table. 5 consist of empty adjective [EA], intensifier [I], lexical hedges [LH], tag question [TQ], rising intonation [RI], and super-polite form [SF]

Famous phrases used as the examples were:

1. “I have a dream today!”
2. “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”
3. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”
4. “I came. I saw. I conquered.”
5. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”
6. “I have not yet begun to fight.”

**Table 5. Observation sheet from *The Washington Post* article**

No.	Utterances	EA	I	LH	TQ	HG	RI	SF	SW	ES	CT	Total
1	<b>I’m sorry [SF], I just [LH] had this idea — it’s probably [LH] crazy, but — look, just [LH] as long as we’re throwing things out here — I had sort of [LH] an idea or vision about maybe [LH] the future? [RI]</b>			✓			✓	✓				3
2	<b>I’m sorry, Mikhail, if I could? [SF] Didn’t mean to cut you off there. Can we agree that this wall maybe [LH] isn’t quite [LH] doing what it should be</b>			✓				✓				2



	doing? <b>Just [LH]</b> looking at everything everyone's been saying, it seems <b>like [LH]</b> we could consider removing it. <b>Possibly [LH]. I don't know [LH]</b> , what does the room feel?										
3	<b>I have to say — I'm sorry — I have to say this [SF]. I don't think we should be as scared of non-fear things as maybe we are? [RI] If that makes sense? [RI] Sorry [SF], I feel like [LH] I'm rambling.</b>					✓	✓			2	
4	I don't want to toot my own horn here at all but I <b>definitely [I]</b> have been to those places and was <b>just [LH]</b> honored to be a part of it as our team did such a <b>wonderful [EA]</b> job of conquering them.	✓	✓	✓						3	
5	<b>I'm sorry, it really [I] feels to me like [LH] we're all equal, you know? [TQ] [SF] I just [LH] feel really [I] strongly on this.</b>				✓	✓	✓		✓	4	
6	<b>Dave, I'm not going to fight you on this. [SF]</b>								✓	1	
	Total	1	3	15	1	0	3	6	0	0	0

### *Empty adjective*

Empty adjectives are used as a way to express an admiration and/or an emotional reaction towards something. In the article, the researcher found only 1 empty adjective occurrence and that is *wonderful*.

### *Intensifier*

Intensifiers are also used as a boosting device. Its use as a boost and/or to strengthen the intended meaning is mostly used by women. From the article, the researcher found 2 intensifiers: *definitely* and *really*, which occurred 2 times.

### *Lexical Hedges*

Hedges, or fillers which showed uncertainty and reduced the strength of a statement, that can be found in the article were 15 in total. That includes:

- *just* (5)
- *probably* (1)
- *sort of* (1)
- *maybe* (2)
- *quite* (1)

- *like* (3)
- *possibly* (1)
- *I don't know* (1)

#### *Tag question*

The use of tag question by women is a way of them to reaffirm their statement and or to seek validation. The researcher could only find 1 tag question in the article, which is: "...*we're all equal, you know?*" What the woman in a meeting intended to say was they're all equal, however she want to make sure that the others all felt the same as her.

#### *Rising Intonation*

Rising intonation is the perceivable change of intonation when women are speaking. A pattern that can be found among speakers where an intonation would rise by the end of a sentence, converting an assertion into some sort of a question. Although rising intonation typically occur in conversation/orally, the researcher found that even in the writing form, these supposed to be sentences converted into questions. Those being:

- "*I had sort of an idea or vision about maybe the future?*"
- "*I don't think we should be as scared of non-fear things as maybe we are?*"
- "*If that makes sense?*"

#### *Super-polite Form*

The use of super-polite form in the article occurred in almost all the examples that Petri used. The speaker (woman in a meeting) repetitively apologized whenever she would start speaking. In one occasion, the speaker apologized for speaking out her opinion and believed that she was rambling.

Another case was the translation of the famous sentence "*I have not yet begun to fight*" that became "*Dave, I'm not going to fight you on this*". The utterance suggests that the speaker would rather not start a fight with her male colleague.

#### ***The Frequency of Women's Language Features in a Meeting***

In this section, the researcher provided the frequency of women's language in a meeting as demonstrated by Alexandra Petri in her TedTalk video on Youtube as well as in her *The Washington Post* article. Out of all Lakoff's (1973) ten women's language features, the researcher only found seven that were expressed. The findings could be found in Table 6.

**Table 6. Women's language features used in women in meeting**

No.	Women's Language Features	TedTalk Video	<i>The Washington Post</i> Article	Total	Percentage
1	Empty Adjectives	1	1	2	4%
2	Intensifier	0	3	3	6%
3	Lexical Hedges	11	15	26	53%
4	Tag Question	0	1	1	2%
5	Hyper-correct Grammar	0	0	0	0%
6	Rising Intonation	1	3	4	8%

7	Super-polite form	1	6	7	14%
8	Avoidance of Strong Swear Word	0	0	0	0%
9	Emphatic Stress	6	0	6	12%
10	Precise Color Term	0	0	0	0%
	Total	20	29	49	100%

The result of women's language features in utterances women would say in a meeting could be found in Table 6 above. It shows that there are a total of 49 features that occurred. The highest frequency of occurrence befalls to lexical hedges or fillers (53%), followed by super-polite form (14%), emphatic stress (12%), rising intonation (8%), intensifier (6%), empty adjectives (4%), and tag question (2%). Other features that could not be find were hyper-correct grammar, avoidance of strong wear word, and precise color term.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the researcher conducted this as to analyse the women's language features used by women in a meeting as proposed by Alexandra Petri in her TedTalk video and *The Washington Post* article. Those utterances made by Petri (2015) was a way for her to demonstrate how the role of women in a meeting when given the chance to talk. The imbalance between men's and women's speech was found due to the dominance that men held (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Pakzadian & Tootkaboni's study, 2018), but was countered by Talbot (2010).

In the case of Petri's utterances, which were taken and 'translated' by her from famous sentences, the researcher found 7 features that were used. Those features included lexical hedges or fillers, followed by super-polite form, emphatic stress, rising intonation, intensifier, empty adjectives, and tag question. Lexical hedges seem to be frequently used.

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