

# Gender, Genre, and Writing Style in Formal Written Texts

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Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i njemačkog jezika i  
književnosti

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**Gender, Genre, and Writing Style in Formal Written Texts  
(Rod, žanr i stil pisanja u pisanim tekstovima formalne prirode)**

Završni rad

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## Abstract

Language and gender are two things that cannot be separated easily. In the last couple decades, sociolinguists began to study the connection between those two. They came to the conclusion that gender plays an important role in the way people use language later in their lives. As a result, we have many different approaches, among which the dominance and the difference approach are the best known. These two approaches describe tendencies in male and female use of language. The characteristics of language of each gender are based on the records of spoken language. The task of this paper was to find out whether the characteristics described by two approaches are present in texts of formal nature, if the spoken language influences the written language, if the characteristics are still valid for each one of two genders, and if the genre of the text influence the author`s choice of the language. The conclusion is that only few things changed over the years, but the characteristics of male and female language remained almost the same, which is surprising if we consider the change of the women`s position in the society.

Key words: language, gender, differences, genre

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## 1. Introduction

People use language every day to communicate with others and to exchange their ideas. Spoken language has always been very important, but it was also the source of many misunderstandings. These misunderstandings are claimed to emerge because each gender uses language differently. For this purpose, gender can be defined in a couple of different ways. Gender is “the physical and/or social condition of being male or female.” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online)

When we consider the relationship of language and gender, we see that it is impossible to separate them. We learn to use language while we are growing up. As we were children, the ways we were raised differed. The consequence of this are different ways we use language as adults. During the last few decades many theories about gender differences in language have appeared. Many linguists tried to explain different approaches to the use of language by members of two genders. One of the socio-linguists, Charles de Rochefort said in 1665 that: “the men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men” (cited in Hamdan, 2011). For example, Jennifer Coates (1993), one of linguists who concentrated on gender and language use, believes that language and gender are so connected that they cannot be separated. Two approaches mostly used to explain the differences in male and female use of language are the dominance approach and the difference approach. Both approaches point out similar characteristics in the use of language, but they explain them in different ways. In the last couple of years the written language has also become important. As in the spoken language, in the written language one can see that there are some differences in writing styles of men and women. Since both of these approaches concerned with gender-based differences were established during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, in this paper I would like to test if the characteristics of above mentioned approaches are still valid, or something has changed in the way men and women nowadays write. To do this, I am going to present some characteristics of the two most important approaches to the study of language, explain where those characteristics come from, and whether they are present in the articles I have chosen for this work. The other factor in this research is the genre of written text. I am dealing with academic articles, which have to be of formal nature. This will help me to test if the genre of text influences the author`s choice of the language.

We begin with some important pieces of information about two approaches; the dominance approach and the difference approach.

## 2. The Dominance Approach

The dominance approach was the first approach that described the differences in the use of language by men and women. One of the first linguists who described this approach was Robin Lakoff. In her work, "Language and Woman's Place" from 1973 she stated that women are still being held as worth less than men, who were seen as dominant in the society. This gave the name to the approach: the dominance approach. Since the men were dominant, the approach is known under the name the male dominance approach. Women's language was always compared with that of men and since men were more educated in the past, their language was considered to be better. On the other hand, the female subordination may be seen as a result of patriarchy which was largely spread in the past.

According to Robin Lakoff, female language differs from male language in many ways. For example, women are using much more tag questions than men do, women are trying to be more polite and they apologize a lot. Also, she claimed that women speak less frequently. This characteristic is a great example of the fact that they are subordinate, that we live in a world where men are in power, and women are not allowed to speak when they want to. On the other side, men are "allowed" to use expletives and coarse language, while we still disapprove of female usage of the same (Lakoff, 1973).

The main reason for this, as Robin Lakoff claims, is that: "As children, women are encouraged to be "little ladies." Little ladies don't scream as vociferously as little boys, and they are chastised more severely for throwing tantrums or showing temper: "high spirits" are expected and therefore tolerated in little boys; docility and resignation are the corresponding traits expected of little girls (Lakoff, 1973) ".

Women are trying to prove that they are educated and good enough by using correct grammar and pronunciation. Interesting thing is the use of intonation by women to make questions out of statements. "The effect is as though one were seeking confirmation, though at the same time the speaker may be the only one who has the requisite information (Lakoff, 1973)".

Although male language is considered to be better, men use far less words to describe things, e.g. they use less different names for colors. Parallel to this, women use much more adjectives, adverbs and intensifiers to create a better picture of thing or event they are describing.

### 3. The Difference Approach

The other most important approach in the study of language and gender is the difference approach. The difference approach appeared as a critic of the dominance approach. Deborah Tannen is the most important advocate of this approach, which she described in her work *You Just Don't Understand* in 1990. It is based on the belief that men and women belong to the different sub-cultures. As they were children, they were raised differently, so the ways they use the language differ. During their formative years, children spend most of the time with other children of the same sex. As the consequence of this, they learn to use the language only in a way, which is believed to be appropriate for that gender.

Boys tend to play in larger groups and mostly they do it outside. As a consequence, one has to be loud if he wants to be heard. In her work *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen believes this is the reason why boys are louder than girls. Other thing that comes out of their games is the assertiveness. If a boy wants to have some status in the group, he has to earn it somehow; he has to impose his opinion. For them it is very important to be leaders, to be important in the group. Boys learn this type of behavior, so they behave like this later in life: they are loud, they like to interrupt, to give orders.

Girls, on the other side, grow up in different conditions. They like to play in smaller groups, where every one of them has equal rights. Every girl has her right to be a part of making decisions. One can say that girls are more likely to make compromises than boys are.

One of the influences of their playgroups is the use of personal pronouns. A male group consists of individuals and female group is really a group, a community. As a consequence, men mostly use the personal pronoun "I". Women try to avoid this isolation out of the group, so they use "we". Also, the use of "we" is the perfect way to camouflage her own opinion. If a woman uses the pronoun "I", it is clear that this is what she believes and she might be seen as assertive. But if she uses "we", one is not sure if this is her opinion or opinion of more people.

Tannen (1990) stated that men use report language, while women use rapport language. The report language means that men mostly describe events or situations, while rapport language means that women are showing understanding of someone's situation. The conclusion we can draw from this is that men like to talk about facts and to avoid feelings. On the other hand, women are more likely to include feelings in their conversations, or to make closer connections to their interlocutors.

## 4. Methodology

In order to see if ideas of two the best known approaches to the study of language and gender are still valid or not, I have chosen four articles published in different academic web-sites by members of both genders. Two of the articles are written by female authors and two by male authors. All of them deal with the topic of violence in the society. This topic was appropriate because facts, statistics and also predictions could be used while dealing with it. All of these elements are important in the study of language, because one can see how men and how women use them.

Although those two approaches are based on the spoken language, I believe that the spoken language influences the way people form their opinion and write it down. Especially since the development of the Internet and instant messaging, the difference between spoken and written language is hard to notice. The articles I am using for this work are academic articles, so they have to be grammatically correct and lack the informal note. Still, some gender conditioned characteristics can be seen. The dominance and the difference approach are products of the past few decades and things have changed since then, but it is still possible that at least some of the characteristics still appear in the language we use every day.

## 5. Characteristics of Female Writing Style

### 5.1. Language

According to sociolinguists, who were trying to explain the source of differences between male and female use of language, the ones who favored the dominance approach claimed that men are more educated and that they use better language:

“Woman's language' has as foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men. The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of (Lakoff, 1973).”

From the two articles I have chosen for this work, it is possible to see that women also can use language very well. Complex sentences female authors have used in their articles are the proof for this:



(1) “Collective identity narratives from Northern Ireland and Chiapas reveal that ethno-national conflicts, in the sense of social mobilization processes based on the triggering of ethno-national solidarity and demands for group rights, provide a space for breaking patterns of gender-based violence by constructing new gender images through the active participation of women in those processes.” (Hoewer, 2013)

(2) “We can say that the occurrence of hate crime appears to cause more segregation, and although a city-level test cannot determine this, I predict that the hate crimes are occurring in census tracts with more white residents in an effort to cluster the minorities into census tracts away from whites.” (Lynch, 2008)

The reason for this could be the fact that women are nowadays more educated than they were twenty or forty years ago, when two of the approaches to the study of gender and language appeared.

On the other hand, Fisherman, another linguist who concentrated on gender and language, had the theory about women doing “*the shitwork*”. This term is used to explain the female tendency to fill the pauses with minimal responses, to use many words to describe something. He and other linguists emphasized that a woman is more likely to use different adjectives or adverbs while describing things to give as exact picture as possible. This characteristic could be noticed very easily both in the spoken language and in written language. In the written language it is more common in literature or in texts of informal nature.

In articles this work bases on, none of the authors used adjectives or adverbs on places where they are superfluous. They used them only where it was needed to specify the denoted thing and to make the ambiguity impossible.

(3) “Although overall there was a pattern of decreasing **residential** segregation over time, three of the five indices showed a pattern of higher segregation in places with a higher percentage of blacks in 2000.” (Lynch, 2008)

## 5.2. (Tag) Questions

One typical characteristic of female speech is the use of questions. Their questions are mostly question tags. With the use of questions in their speech, women are trying to get the hint if they are on the right track; they want someone to confirm things they are saying. This can be a sign of female insecurity as individuals. As above mentioned, girls mostly grow up in groups. There is

no individual girl in these groups. Consequence of this is that women almost always try to find support and very rarely do things alone.

During this research, questions appear at the beginning of the article written by Lynch. She uses questions to introduce us to the topic of her work:

(4) "This cross-sectional analysis asks: Do hate crime levels predict white/black segregation levels? How does hate crime predict different measures of white/black segregation?" (Lynch, 2008)

The same author uses a question as a connection between two sentences.

Questions are not that common in written language, especially not in texts of formal nature like these articles. Articles like this are written to give answers to the readers, and not to confuse them even more with new, unanswered questions.

### 5.3. Hedging

Women usually avoid expressing their own opinion. This is called hedging. In the spoken language, women tend to emphasize that something is not their opinion, but opinion of somebody else. This characteristic is not as obvious in the spoken language as it is in the written. In the written texts, especially ones of the formal nature, authors have to mention if they are using someone else`s words. These texts also have to have some theoretical background, but this does not mean that the work has to be the presentation of the previous researches. Articles like this should also contain some new conclusions or be compared with the current situation. At times female authors of articles seem to be busy with presenting facts and statistics, or with citing. Also, the authors used a lot of references to the works of others.

Table 1.: The use of references and citation by men and by women

	<b>References</b>	<b>Citation</b>
<b>Men</b>	87	42
<b>Women</b>	115	32

In one of the articles, the author writes: "There are limits to the claims I can make from the data... (Lynch, 2008)". This could be a great example of the hedging. She used the previous researches and wrote this, but it still may not be so.

With respect to this one can come to the same conclusion as with the use of questions: a woman seeks support of her statements through the use of facts, statistics, and citations. Men, on the

other hand seem to be more confident when it comes to making statements, but this will be mentioned later throughout this work.

#### 5.4. The Use of Personal Pronouns

Another way of women to avoid the direct expression of their opinion or the isolation from the group is the use of personal pronoun “we”. Women love attention, but they do not like to be blamed for something. The reason for this is, according to Tannen, the fact that girls grow up in groups and identify with each other, so individuality does not exist there. From here comes the need of woman to speak for a larger group of people. She is afraid to be seen as an individual, so it is easier to represent the whole group.

The authors of articles use pronouns, “I” and “we”. When they use the personal pronoun “I”, authors are describing methods they have used while working on their researches:

(5) “I contacted all participants personally; before the interview, I informed them about the study and its aims and obtained their written informed consent. I was the only person who extracted themes from the data.” (Hoewer, 2013)

Here one can see that they were working alone on this and that they want to be acknowledged for it. On the other hand, they use personal pronoun “we” when they are making some conclusions:

(6) “While we can draw interesting lessons...” (Hoewer, 2013)

(7) “As we work to decrease hate crime, increase opportunities and remove the concentrated disadvantage of segregation, we can move in the direction of a nation that truly has liberty and justice for all.” (Lynch, 2008)

One of the authors, Melanie Hoewer, avoids using any of the pronouns, so she uses “this article”. This method is actually a good way to present that what is written is your opinion, without imposing it. Contrary to this presupposition, this author writes the whole paragraph where she gives herself the credit for the research. This leads me to the conclusion that this woman is confident and that she does not need someone to stand behind her and to support her.

#### 5.5. The Use of Expletives and Coarse Language

Women are said to be very polite in most things they do. It is the same with the use of language. In the spoken language, it is still disapproved when a woman uses expletives or coarse language.

In the past, the use of this type of language was like forbidden for women. Nowadays it can be heard. The use of this type of language is mostly connected with the informal language, but we are under the influence of it every day through movies and music. This exposure to coarse language and expletives led to the public acceptance of it. Still, this language is not supposed to be a part of the formal written texts.

In the articles I am using for this work, only one of the female authors is using a word that could be not completely appropriate. It is the word “black” with the meaning “people of dark-colored skin”. To avoid the misunderstanding, the author writes how and why does she uses this exact word:

“Black and African American will be used interchangeably, although black (with or without capitalization) is a better term because it indicates that this is about perceived race and notes that not all blacks are African American (meaning not necessarily of African descent).” (Lynch, 2008)

Also, this note to the reader by the author about the use of word “black” can be seen as an apology to people who might be offended. This can be also an example of the thesis that women tend to apologize, even when they it is not needed.

When we look at this specific word, it has become usual in everyday speech. Only problem is that many people still consider “black” to be derogatory term. Having this in mind, this example may not be very good, so the whole thesis could be easily dismissed.

As mentioned, expletives and the coarse language are usually parts of spoken language. This is the main reason why it is not surprising that these texts do not contain real examples of that type of language.

## 6. Characteristics of Male Writing Style

### 6.1. Language

In the past, men always had the better opportunities for education and, consequently, had a richer vocabulary and used language better than women.

While reading and comparing articles, I noticed that one of the male authors uses simpler sentences:

(8) “The beating was so savage that his leg and several fingers had to be amputated. Brain injuries were so severe that he can barely utter simple sentences to this day.” (Johnston, 2012)

The other author used a greater number of longer and more complex sentences:

(9) “In predominantly oral cultures, such as those of rural Nepal, the communities of memory that are most important are those defined by family, ethnicity and locality, with national narratives playing a smaller role, not least since the very idea of a Nepali was traditionally defined in a way that excluded most of the population.” (Robins, 2014)

In works like this, it is better to use simpler sentences. If the author uses too complicated sentences, the reader is more likely to get lost. Shorter sentences can also help keep the reader interested in the further development of the topic.

These short and clear sentences could be a result of play groups in their childhood. As it was mentioned above, boys tend to play in larger groups where one had to give orders if he wants to be considered as a leader. Orders are usually short and they contain the most important information.

Men`s language is called report language. They present us information and facts about something, while avoiding feelings or too many explanations. When men are telling facts, they know they are right and that no one can argue what he is saying. If someone does argue his words, his status in the society is not as stable as it was before. He prevents his failure and uses facts. Also, these facts can help him to be seen as smarter than someone else, what helps with acquiring better status, too.

This characteristic seems to be only partially correct. The male authors of the articles were using facts and statistics, but it was not that often as it was by the female authors. The same situation is with the use of words of the others. One of the male authors used citation and paraphrasing more often than the other, but it was not so much that one can suspect of the author`s originality.

Contrary to my expectations, overall number of citations used by men is greater than the number of citation used by women. (see Table 1)

Sociolinguists came to the conclusion that men do not use adjectives or adverbs very often. If they used any of them, it would make their sentences complicated and would describe things more precisely, what is not that common for men.

During this research, I had to notice that female authors were not using adverbs or adjectives to intensify the meaning of following words. On the other hand, male authors were doing that:

(10) “State repression, is not a monolithic affair captured **wholly** by aggregate measures of police budgets, size of security apparatus, or protester deaths and injuries, but rather can be

**fruitfully** analyzed both hierarchically at different levels and laterally, across these levels, where elite interests frequently diverge.” (Johnston, 2012)

(11) “While disappearances occurred from the start of the conflict (and even before it), the introduction of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) into the **escalating** conflict in 2001

**dramatically** increased human rights violations.” (Robins, 2014)

## 6.2. Questions

The asking of questions is said to be a typical characteristic of female speech, because they want to know everything. On the other hand, men do not want their interlocutors to feel attacked, so they avoid asking questions and they deal only with what was said.

This avoiding of questions is present also in written language. In this case it is quite hard to determine whether this characteristic applies or not, because texts are of formal nature and they are made to give answers or explain things, not to complicate them even more.

## 6.3. The Use of Personal Pronouns

Sociolinguists claimed that men like to emphasize their importance, so they are not afraid to use the personal pronoun “I” where it is possible. They like to say their own opinion, or to retell what they have experienced. While boys were growing up in larger and not that connected groups, each one of them had to keep his individuality if he wants to survive. Each one of them remains an individual inside of a larger group, what reflects later during their lives. Men are not that dependent on the others and are not afraid of what others would think about them.

It is the case in two articles I have chosen for this work. Both of two male authors use personal pronoun “I” many times. When they use it, they are expressing both their own opinion and their role in the research:

(12) “Additionally, I will specify a middle-range of state violence...” (Johnston, 2012)

(13) “In general, I suggest that the gap between official ideology and the corruption...”

(Johnston, 2012)

Also, they are writing about their own experiences during researches they were conducting. One of the authors uses pronoun “I” as if he is bragging about his role in that research.

(14) “I used a participatory methodology... I met 151 family members...” (Robins, 2014)

Because of this, the reader can get the feeling that the author has a bit too high an opinion about his own importance.

It is not bad to express what one think and it is important that the person is not afraid of what his words could cause. But one should be aware that he should not be too assertive.

But it is hard to change something we acquire during our formative years. During that period, men learn to impose their opinion to the group. As a consequence, they continue to do so in all periods of their lives because they think they have to prove themselves.

#### 6.4. The Use of Expletives and Coarse Language

Men who are polite are not rare. Men who do use coarse language are the most normal thing in the world. When one hears a man who uses this type of language, no one does react. Men were always the stronger and more powerful gender, so many things were allowed to them.

Nowadays, their position is at the same point as it was before. They can do whatever they want to, without being judged too much. This characteristic could also be explained by the growing up in groups. Boys have to win their status in this group, they have to be special. In order to be as an important member, many of them start to curse. Others see them as brave and powerful. They pick up this habit in their childhood, so it remains a part of their lives.

Even in texts of formal nature, men do not avoid using expletives and coarse language. In one of the articles, the author cites words of someone else which contained this type of language: “Putin’s promise to “waste them to the shithouse” was fulfilled (Johnston, 2012).” It is not something big, but still is not that common, especially for the formal writing style. We saw that even female author used a word that could be understood as an expletive. To avoid critics, she wrote a note to explain the reason why she used that word. Contrary to this, the male author in whose work the coarse element appear, does not apologize. On the other side, his act is arguable, because he was citing someone else`s words. But when we consider the fact that he was citing Putin`s words, it confirms the thesis that men tend to use coarse language.

## 7. Conclusion

Although the approaches to the study of language and gender are products of not so close past most characteristics are still valid. One cannot be completely sure whether all of the characteristic stand or not, because all study was based on very few researches of spoke language. Since this field of sociolinguistics is very large and not yet fully investigated, each one of the approaches to the study of this topic has its advantages or disadvantages.

The use of language by one person can be determined by his or her gender, but it is also determined by the society and the time in which the person lives.

When we compare what is expected of women while using language and what is really happening, we see that many things are present in both spoken and written language. Since both of the approaches are a little bit old-fashioned, I expected that the way women use language has changed much more. The main reason for my expectations was the emancipation of women and the change of their position in the society. This work showed that although conditions of life changed and much more women have higher education, they are still using language very similarly as it was the case a couple of decades ago: they are trying to “hide” themselves behind someone else`s words, they avoid isolation and are still trying to be very polite. The only thing that changed is their vocabulary, which is now at the same level as that of men. Probably the most important thing is that conditions changed and women are allowed to write about topics like this, their works are accepted and being held worth the same as men`s works.

If we compare male use of language in theory and in practice, we can see that it has not changed significantly. Most of the characteristics as Lakoff and Tannen described them remained present in the way men talk or write. Men are still trying to achieve better status through the use of language that is sometimes assertive, or not completely appropriate for the situation. They still do not like to intrude the personal space of others with asking too many questions. Also, they tend to hide their feelings and represent themselves as persons of facts.

Even in this case, the characteristics do not apply only for the spoken or for the written language, but for both types of language. That confirms the thesis that spoken language influences the way we write.

On the other hand, from this work is seen that also the genre of text does influence the language. The authors had in mind that they were writing an academic article. They reduced the use of expletives and coarse language to the minimum and used them only when it was necessary. They did not use questions in the sense of finding out the information, as it is the case in informal



written or spoken language, but to raise some problems of their researches. The use of references and citations can be seen as a way of hedging, but both of them are the most essential part of an academic article if the author wants it to be plausible.

When we sum up everything written here, we can see that there are some factors which jointly influence our choice of language. One of the factors is our gender, because we are raised in the way which is determined by our gender. The other factor is the genre of the text we are writing. No one would use the same writing style when writing an e-mail to a friend and when writing an academic article. Most people pay more attention to the choice of words or structures when they write a formal text, but at the same time, they are not aware of the fact that their gender plays a great role in the way they are using language.

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