

4-25-2021

Perceptions of 'Ladylike' Language: Assessing Gender Barriers to Sex Communication

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Claire C., "Perceptions of 'Ladylike' Language: Assessing Gender Barriers to Sex Communication" (2021). *Honors Capstones*. 876.
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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Perceptions of 'Ladylike' Language: Assessing Gender Barriers to Sex Communication

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department Of

Communication

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

(August, 2021)

University Honors Program
Capstone Faculty Approval Page

Capstone Title (print or type)

"Perceptions of Ladylike Language: Assessing Gender Barriers to Sex
Communication"

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Faculty Approval Signature _____ Approval Emailed by Professor _____

Department of (print or type) _____ Communication _____

Date of Approval (print or type) _____ January 26, 2021 _____

Date and Venue of Presentation _____ April 29, 2021 NIU CURE _____

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ABSTRACT

This research project seeks to identify and analyze the expectations placed on male and female communication as it relates to sex, one area in which communication is highly important. In order to identify these expectations, a survey was distributed to current students at Northern Illinois University asking them to label a series of 30 sexual phrases related to asserting sexual boundaries, stating sexual desires, and asking for consent as being expected to be said by someone who is definitely a man, likely a man, equally likely to be a man or a woman, likely a woman, or definitely a woman. Each response was then coded with a number such that definitely a woman = -2, likely a woman = -1, equally likely to be a man or a woman = 0, likely a man = 1, and definitely a man = 2. All responses for every question were added together in order to assess the final masculine or feminine perceptions of each phrase. The more negative the final sum corresponding to a phrase, the more feminine the phrase was perceived; the more positive the sum, the more masculine the phrase was perceived. Results indicate that phrases asserting a sexual boundary that are perceived as feminine always include language ‘softeners’ – phrases that indicate tentativeness or politeness. However, statements of sexual desire and questions of consent featuring expletives or language ‘softeners’ are not unequally expected of men or women. The expectation for women to incorporate politeness or tentativeness into asserting sexual boundaries may disadvantage women and make their sexual rejections less likely to be respected.

INTRODUCTION

The idea that men and women communicate differently is embedded into the collective mind of our society. Young girls are told to speak in a 'ladylike' manner to mirror the alleged communication style of adult women. Men and boys sometimes ridicule one another for using words or phrases that could be seen as feminine or atypical for male communication. From a literature perspective, it has been suggested that men and women exemplify powerful or powerless speech to different degrees based off of their relative positioning in cultural hierarchies (Lakoff 1975). Yet, contemporary research has subverted these assumptions by disproving many of the expectations for male and female communication (Grob & Allen, 1996; Dindia, 2006; Timmerman, 2002).

These data tell us that men and women, despite subtle differences in their speech, are largely similar in their communication styles, and that neither men nor women use powerless or powerful speech substantially more than the other (Dindia 2006). These data do not, however, extinguish the possibility that men and women exemplify different communication styles in very specific situations, including in the sexual situations explored in this project which are under-researched elsewhere. It is possible, therefore, that the expectations reflected in this research are based in reality and the personal, real-world experiences of respondents. It is also possible that the expectations placed on male and female sexual communication expressed in this study are not based in reality at all but are instead derived from some other source such as film or television

portrayals of male/female sexual relationships. Either way, it is important to evaluate these expectations more closely to open the door for future research to shed light on these unknowns. To begin to do that, we must first substantiate the claim that these expectations exist at all. This research will attempt to do exactly that by identifying the expectations placed on male and female communication in three spheres of sexual communication: expressing sexual desires, asking for consent to engage in sexual activity, and enforcing boundaries related to personal space and sexual autonomy. Within these spheres, this project will seek to understand whether and to what extent our society expects certain phrases, questions, and declarations to be reserved exclusively for men or women.

SIGNIFICANCE

The purpose of this research is to contribute to existing literature related to the intersection of sex and communication. Expectations placed on both men and women regarding how they voice sexual boundaries, express sexual desires, or ask for consent could have damaging implications for worthwhile consent and sex communication. If the expectation is for women to express sexual desire only using specific language, it may be difficult for women to have the confidence to use other language that more accurately reflects their desires. In expressing sexual boundaries, language expectations may place a burden on either men or women (or both) to use language that does not fully reflect the strength of the boundary they are asserting. If polite

language is expected, it may discourage men or women from asserting a boundary as strongly and clearly as possible. Further, expectations for the ways men and women communicate can have implications for how their words are interpreted. If we expect women to communicate in a certain way, we may misinterpret the words of women to subconsciously bring reality into compliance with these preconceived expectations. The effects of this misinterpretation can be devastating in instances where communication is highly important, such as leading up to or during sex. If a woman is expected to be shy speaking about sexual desires, for example, then potential partners may search for a subtle admission of desire that is not there, finding it in an innocent or even uncomfortable laugh or smile or the way someone is dressed. The perception of female sexual shyness may, therefore, contribute to greater belief in rape myths and in the further victimization of women (Burt, 1980).

Gaining a greater understanding of our expectations for the way men and women communicate in sexual situations can potentially help us unpack those expectations and make consent education more effective. If we expect men and women to communicate differently regarding sex in general and regarding sexual boundary setting in particular, then we may need to expand sexual education to acknowledge and rectify the miscommunication that can occur between men and women resulting from those different expectations.

METHOD

In order to gauge whether and to what extent sexual phrases are coded as masculine or feminine, a survey was created and distributed to 11 current NIU seniors (N = 11) including 6 who identified as women and 5 who identified as men. Students chose to voluntarily participate in this research by following a link that was posted to the official “NIU Class of 2021” Facebook page. Participants were led to an extensive overview of the project as well as a list of potential risks involved in participating, and each gave explicit consent for their responses to be used anonymously for research purposes prior to beginning the linked survey.

The survey itself consisted of thirty different sexual phrases, with ten belonging to each of three general categories: asserting boundaries, stating desires, and asking for consent. Within each category, some phrases included expletives, references to specific sexual acts, and sexual commands. Other phrases incorporated the following language ‘softeners,’:

- a. Framing a declaration as a question.
- b. Apologizing before or after declaring a personal boundary or rejecting a proposal for sex.
- c. Using tentative phrases related to a sexual or personal boundary like ‘maybe,’ ‘not sure,’ ‘not really,’ among others.
- d. Using non-specific phrases related to sexual desire such as ‘turned on,’ ‘I want you to make me feel good,’ and ‘touch me.’
- e. Accompanying a statement of sexual desire with ‘please.’

Language ‘softeners’ are an extension of some of the powerless language patterns discussed by Lakoff in 1976, and they all effectively lower the confidence and/or assertiveness of the speaker. These language ‘softeners’ were used in this research as a way of making some of the sexual phrases within each category – asserting boundaries, stating desires, and asking for consent – reflect less aggression on behalf of the speaker, especially in comparison to the phrases involving expletives or commands.

Respondents were asked to determine whether they expected each phrase to be spoken by someone who was i) ‘definitely a man’, ii) ‘likely a man’, iii) ‘equally likely to be a man or a woman’, iv) ‘likely a woman’, or v) ‘definitely a woman’. Each answer choice was later converted to a number between 2 and -2, with 2 corresponding with ‘definitely a man’, 1 corresponding with ‘likely a man’, 0 corresponding with ‘equally likely to be a man or a woman’, -1 corresponding with ‘likely a woman’, and -2 corresponding with ‘definitely a woman’. The sum of all individual responses for a phrase became the numerical value of that phrase, with numbers above 6 considered very masculine, numbers between 3 and 6 considered moderately masculine, numbers between 2 and -2 considered gender-neutral, numbers between -3 and -6 considered moderately feminine, and numbers below -6 considered very feminine.

In other words, the more negative the final sum corresponding to a phrase, the more feminine the phrase is perceived; the more positive the sum, the more masculine the phrase is perceived. The negative/positive scale was used so that opposite responses to the same phrase cancelled each

other out, thus making it more difficult for phrases to be extremely positive or negative by the end of data collection. This was done on purpose to have a high burden to prove the gender-coded nature of sexual language given the doubt that has been cast on the results of other studies related to gender differences and language (Grob & Allen, 1996; Dindia, 2006; Timmerman, 2002).

DATA

Table 1: Sexual boundary statements from most masculine to most feminine

Item	'definitely a woman' – 'definitely a man' response scale					Total Value
	(-2)	(-1)	(0)	(1)	(2)	
"That shit doesn't feel good."	1	1	0	5	4	10 – very masculine
"I'm not into that shit."	1	1	1	6	2	7 – very masculine
"I'm not in the fucking mood."	2	2	1	4	2	2 – gender-neutral
"Back the fuck off."	1	3	3	1	3	2 – gender-neutral
"Don't fucking touch me."	0	3	2	2	1	1 – gender-neutral
"I'm not sure I want to have sex."	0	8	3	0	0	-8 – very feminine
"Sorry, I don't feel that way about you."	3	5	3	0	0	-11 – very feminine
"I'm not really feeling this, sorry."	4	3	4	0	0	-11 – very feminine
"Can we just cuddle instead?"	3	6	2	0	0	-12 – very feminine
"I'm not really comfortable with this."	4	7	0	0	0	-15 – very feminine

N = 11

Table 2: Statements of sexual desire from most masculine to most feminine

Item	'definitely a woman' – 'definitely a man' response scale					Total Value
	(-2)	(-1)	(0)	(1)	(2)	
"You like that?"	0	0	4	6	1	8 – very masculine
"Can I touch you here?"	0	1	5	5	0	4 – moderately masculine
"Should I stop?"	0	2	5	4	0	2 – gender-neutral
"Does that feel good?"	0	2	7	1	1	1 – gender-neutral
"Are you into this?"	2	2	4	2	1	-2 – gender-neutral
"Are you sure about this?"	0	4	5	2	0	-2 – gender-neutral
"Is this still okay?"	0	5	3	3	0	-2 – gender-neutral
"Do you want to have sex?"	1	4	4	2	0	-4 – moderately feminine
"Do you want to try something else?"	2	3	4	2	0	-5 – moderately feminine
"Are you enjoying yourself?"	2	3	4	1	1	-6 – moderately feminine

N = 11

Table 3: Questions of consent from most masculine to most feminine

Item	'definitely a woman' – 'definitely a man' response scale					Total Value
	(-2)	(-1)	(0)	(1)	(2)	
“Take off your clothes.”	0	0	3	4	4	12 – very masculine
“I want to fuck you.”	0	1	4	3	3	8 – very masculine
“Make me cum.”	0	2	3	2	4	8 – very masculine
“Let’s try doggy style.”	0	1	4	4	2	7 – very masculine
“I am so turned on right now.”	0	3	3	2	3	5 – moderately masculine
“I want you to make me feel good.”	2	2	3	2	2	0 – gender-neutral
“Let me please you.”	3	2	5	1	0	-7 – very feminine
“I want you to touch me.”	1	7	2	1	0	-8 – very feminine
“Please touch me.”	3	4	3	1	0	-9 – very feminine
“Touch right here.”	2	7	0	2	0	-9 – very feminine

N = 11

HOW TO EVALUATE THE DATA

Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 depict every response recorded for each sexual phrase within the three categories – asserting boundaries, stating desires, and asking for consent – featured in this research. Each table focuses on one of the three categories, with Table 1 reserved for the phrases that assert boundaries, Table 2 reserved for those that state desires, and Table 3 reserved for those that ask for consent. In each table, the final column (labeled “Total Value”) reveals how masculine or feminine each item of that table was found to be after considering all responses to the item. As a reminder, totals above 6 are considered very masculine, totals between 3 and 6 considered moderately masculine, totals between 2 and -2 considered gender-neutral, totals between -3 and -6 considered moderately feminine, and totals below -6 considered very feminine.

Each table has a primary row of “(-2), (-1), (0), (1), (2)” which corresponds with the aforementioned survey response choices of definitely a woman, likely a woman, equally likely to be a man or a woman, likely a man, or definitely a man respectively. Under each of these numerical representations of possible survey responses, each table reveals the number of respondents who chose that answer choice for each sexual phrase in the table. By multiplying each number representing a survey response choice by the number of people who selected that choice for each sexual phrase and adding the results together, we arrive at the number in the “Total Value” column.

As an example, we can look at Table 1, to the item “I’m not sure I want to have sex.” Since 0 people chose the option corresponding with (-2), 8 people chose the option corresponding with (-1), 3 people chose the option corresponding with (0), and 0 people chose the options corresponding with (1) or (2), we must add together 0, -8, 0, 0, and 0. The final column depicts the correct answer, -8, and this reflects the final, very feminine value of the phrase “I’m not sure I want to have sex.”

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In the asserting boundaries category, five of the ten phrases were found to be coded as very feminine; all of these very feminine phrases included language ‘softeners’ and were the only phrases in this category to do so. Two of the ten phrases were found to be coded as very

masculine; both of these very masculine phrases included the expletive “shit” and were the only phrases to do so. Three of the ten phrases were found to be coded as gender-neutral; all of these gender-neutral phrases contained variations of the expletive “fuck.” None of the phrases were found to be coded as moderately masculine or moderately feminine.

In the stating desires category, four of the ten phrases were found to be coded as very feminine; three of these very feminine phrases included language ‘softeners,’ and three phrases included commands. Four of the ten phrases were found to be coded as very masculine; two of these phrases were direct commands, one was a subtle command, one featured an expletive, and all four featured a reference to a specific sexual act. One of the ten phrases – “I am so turned on right now” – was found to be coded as moderately masculine; this phrase included a language ‘softener’ of vagueness. Only the phrase “I want you to make me feel good” was found to be coded as gender-neutral; this phrase also included a language ‘softener’ of vagueness.

Finally, in the asking for consent category, one of the ten phrases was found to be coded as very masculine; this phrase was the least formal of the consent questions, featured no expletives, and did not include any language ‘softeners.’ One of the ten phrases was found to be coded as moderately masculine; this phrase included no expletives and did not include any language ‘softeners.’ Three of the ten questions were found to be coded as moderately feminine; one of these phrases included a language ‘softener,’ and they were all formal questions that included no

expletives. Five of the ten phrases were found to be coded as gender-neutral; none of these phrases featured expletives or language ‘softeners.’

DISCUSSION

Phrases which asserted a sexual boundary were more likely to be coded as feminine than as masculine. This may imply that there is an expected greater need for women to vocalize discomfort in sexual situations than for men, or this could imply that men are expected to have fewer sexual boundaries than women. The boundary phrases which featured language ‘softeners’ were all coded as very feminine, which implies that there is an expectation for women to be polite, gentle, or vague in asserting sexual boundaries. On the other hand, using certain expletives – in this case the word “shit” – in asserting a sexual boundary was coded as very masculine, implying that there is no comparable expectation of politeness when it comes to men asserting boundaries.

Phrases asserting boundaries with the strongest expletive, “fuck,” were all coded as gender-neutral, with is an interesting contrast to the previously established expectation of polite speech for women. This interesting discrepancy may be attributed to the tone of anger in the phrases using a variation of the word “fuck”. Whereas the word “shit” was incorporated into phrases which voiced displeasure about a specific sexual action or behaviour, the word “fuck” was incorporated into phrases which voiced displeasure about the person trying to engage in *any* sexual action or

behaviour with the speaker. The phrase “that shit doesn’t feel good,” for example, does not necessarily mean the speaker is expressing distaste for all sexual actions in which the listener and speaker may engage. The phrase “don’t fucking touch me,” on the other hand, does not differentiate between disapproval for a specific sexual activity and disapproval for the listener as potential sexual partner in total. Because the phrases using “fuck” have this incorporation of a personal attack on the listener, they read as angry where the phrases using “shit” may not. Anger, therefore, may be seen as a potential equalizer in gender-coded sexual boundary communication. Whereas women are expected to be polite to an extent in boundary setting, if someone is seemingly very angry in asserting a boundary, there is an understanding that it could be either a man or woman speaking. This may be because there is an expected reason for women to be angry on occasion in dealing with sexually forward or aggressive men and because men are stereotypically angrier than woman in a plethora of situations. In short, men and women can both express boundaries using variations of the word “fuck” when angry, but polite boundary setting is still seen as the primary method of boundary setting for women.

Phrases stating sexual desires were almost perfectly equally likely to be coded as masculine and feminine. This means that both men and women are expected to both have and voice sexual desires. That said, there are clear patterns that differentiate the ways men and women are expected to voice these desires. Language ‘softeners’ were expected more in very feminine statements of sexual desire, but they were also featured in statements coded as masculine and gender-neutral.

The language 'softeners' coded as masculine or gender-neutral fell into the category of vagueness because they discussed a sexual desire without explicit reference to an act, position, or body part.

The language 'softeners' in the phrases coded as very feminine, on the other hand, incorporated vagueness as well as other categories of soft speech such as saying "please." This implies that vagueness in sexual communication is more gender-fluid whereas explicit politeness in stating desire is seen as feminine.

Most interesting in the stating desires portion of this research are the phrases that were found to be very masculine and very feminine. All four of the very masculine phrases referenced specific sexual actions like "take your clothes off", meaning they were the opposite of vague. This implies that vagueness is gender-fluid but directness less so, with women not being expected to be as direct in their statement of desires. Three of the four very masculine phrases featured a variation of a sexual command, demonstrating that commanding a partner to do something leading up to or during sex is seen as masculine. This could be attributed to the longstanding social expectation for men to fill more leadership roles than women.

That said, the very feminine phrases in this category also included versions of sexual commands and some reference to specific sexual actions. Most of the commands that were seen as very feminine incorporated language 'softeners,' making them distinct from the very masculine commands which did not. The language 'softeners' in the very feminine sexual commands included vagueness (for example, saying "let me please you" without explaining how), and also

politeness (“please touch me”). The exception here is the command “touch right here,” which not only included no language ‘softeners,’ but also referenced a specific sexual action. The patterns of this research would have suggested this phrase should have been seen as very masculine; instead, it was seen as very feminine. One possible explanation for this may be that there is a greater expectation for women to need to give more direction regarding navigating their anatomy than for men. Pointing out a specific location on the body for a sexual partner to touch may be seen as unnecessary for men, whereas women may find their partner a bit lost in trying to please them. This phrase provides an interesting exception to the pattern that is otherwise fairly clear in the stating desires category.

Phrases asking for consent were not significantly more likely to be coded as feminine than they were to be coded as masculine. This implies that both men and women are nearly equally expected to ask for consent in sexual situations. The highest proportion of consent questions were coded as gender-neutral, which also reinforces this expectation. However, very formal questions related to consent, like “do you want to have sex?” were more likely to be coded as feminine, whereas less formal questions like “you like that?” were more likely to be coded as masculine. This may imply that informal language is expected from men in consent communication but not expected from women.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was impaired by an extremely small sample size, but this project is easily replicable for future research with a larger population size. This research also tests for college student perceptions of gender-coded communication but does not incorporate the perceptions of any other group. It may be worthwhile to test for the perceptions of other age groups in order to compare perceptions of gender-coded language over time. This comparison strategy may also assist in drawing conclusions regarding where these perceptions come from, which is an important aspect of this project and worth analyzing further. Another potential limitation of this research stems from the topic of sexual communication itself and the explicit or suggestive nature of some of the phrases studied; taboo topics or topics which may be triggering have the potential to turn away potential research participants and, therefore, muddy how representative results are of the general population.

Ultimately, this study could serve as a jumping off point for multiple avenues of future research. A natural next step of this project would be to ask respondents to choose from a selection of possible meanings of each phrase included in this study. This would be used to determine the relationship between how universally understood a sexual phrase is and how masculine or feminine that phrase is. This could show definitively that what is perceived as feminine speech during and leading up to sex, including sexual boundary setting, is more likely to be misinterpreted than masculine speech. Obviously, miscommunication in these situations would

serve to victimize women, so this could reveal a critical flaw in consent communication, showing both how our society does not adequately position women to advocate for themselves during sex and positions potential sexual partners to ignore feminine communication forms during sex.

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