

SEX-DIFFERENTIATED LANGUAGE VERSUS ROLE-DIFFERENTIATED LANGUAGE:
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF ROBIN LAKOFF'S HYPOTHESES IN THREE PLAYS

by

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Sociolinguists are increasingly interested in the possibility that the sex of a speaker is reflected in his or her speech. A number of competent studies exist in this area: Adelaide Haas' "Stereotypes and Evidence,"¹ an evaluation of male and female spoken language differences; Susan Phillips' "Sex Differences in Language,"² an exploration of how differences in language contribute to the maintenance of male dominance; Carol Edelsky's "Question Intonation and Sex Roles,"³ a study pointing to intonation as a crucial variable in the evaluation of sex differences in language, and Mary Ritchie Key's Male/Female Language,⁴ an examination of the many differences in male and female linguistic behaviors.

Perhaps the most complete analysis to date of sex-determined differentiation in spoken language has been made by Robin Lakoff in Language and Woman's Place (1975). Language, says Lakoff, both reflects and subtly reinforces a sexist social order. This sexist social order underlies what it is thought proper for females to say and hear and what it is thought possible for them to create in the way of literature and ideas. There are, undoubtedly, certain basic physical differences between men and women which are accepted without contradiction among scientists: women mature more rapidly than men, women have less muscular strength and they live longer. In addition to these physical facts, women are often socialized to think of themselves as weaker mentally as well. This socialization process thereby leads women to use a language style that many regard as submissive. Women's language, according to Lakoff's

thesis, tends to be hyper-formal and nonassertive. Lakoff cites the following as six characteristics of women's speech in our culture:

1. Lexical choice: Women use certain words that men do not. For example, they engage in fine color discriminations: beige, aquamarine, lavender. Women use "weaker" (less blasphemous or obscene) expletives than men: "Oh dear," "fudge."
2. Use of empty or "personal" adjectives such as: adorable, cute, divine, lovely and sweet. These adjectives denote approval of the trivial, the personal, in terms of the speaker's own subjective emotional reaction to the thing being spoken of.
3. Use of question intonation in conjunction with declaratives and tag questions such as: "John is here, isn't he?"
4. Frequent use of modifiers which serve as hedges: sort of, kind of, I guess, like, very, really.
5. Intensive use of the word so: "I feel so happy."
6. Use of hypercorrect forms or polite grammar: "It is I." "Whom did you wish to see?" "Please." "Thank you."⁵

There is much uncertainty as to whether these differences really exist or are merely sex-role stereotypes. It is my opinion that certain differences in language use do exist but that they may not necessarily be sex-determined as Robin Lakoff asserts. It may be that these six characteristics are merely typical of the language of those who lack power. And since women are so often relegated to the group which is out of power, these characteristics have come to be identified as somehow feminine.

Sociolinguist Cheris Kramer's 1974 study of sex-related language differences in the cartoons of the New Yorker supports this idea. She found what she called the "folk-linguistics" about women's language being perpetrated in the cartoons. She states, "In general, women in the cartoons speak less forcefully than men."⁶ Kramer feels that beliefs about language differences are as important as any real differences and that, "these perceived differences do not necessarily correspond to real ones, but they are important as indicators of cultural attitudes and prejudices" (p. 83).

Mary Ritchie Key also touches on this idea in Male/Female Language. "All kinds of restrictions and limitations have been imposed on a female's linguistic habits with the idea that these behavioral patterns would ensure her femininity" (p. 102). Indeed, some women, to ensure that they will be treated as "ladies," accept and perpetuate their inferior status by continued use of a weaker language style. However, one important empirical study which would lend itself to Lakoff's hypothesis concerning these six characteristics was done by Faye Crosby and Linda Nyquist at Boston

University, 1976.⁷ This study involved sixteen male and sixteen female under-graduates at Boston University who engaged in four three-minute dyadic conversations with persons of the same sex. Half of the conversations were on assigned topics (e.g., the merits of Boston) and all were tape recorded. One point was given to the speaker each time one of the six characteristics occurred. The scorers were blind to the sex of the speaker. The hypothesis that the six characteristics occur more in female speech than in men's speech was confirmed. The mean number of occurrences of the six characteristics was statistically significant: 5.16 in the conversation of females and 3.08 in the conversation of males. Lakoff examines each of the six characteristics in detail.

Lexical Choice

Lakoff discusses the male/female difference in lexical choice.

As an example of lexical differences, imagine a man and woman both looking at the same wall, painted a pinkish shade of purple. The woman may say: (2) "The wall is mauve," with no one consequently forming any special impression of her as a result of the words alone; but if the man should say (2), one might well conclude he was imitating a woman sarcastically or was homosexual, or an interior decorator. (p. 8)

Although the statement that one might "well conclude he was a homosexual" seems a rather hasty generalization, Lakoff continues by stating that these discriminations would be unremarkable in a woman's active vocabulary, and that the reason why color discriminations are relevant for women but not men is basically a sexist one.

A clue is contained in the way many men in our society view other "unworldly" topics, such as high culture and the Church, as outside the world of men's work, relegated to women and men whose masculinity is not unquestionable. Men tend to relegate to women things that are not of concern to them, or do not involve their egos. Among these are problems of fine color discrimination. (p. 9)

More precisely, a man would very likely perceive the difference in the two colors but perhaps be less likely to search for the correct label for the color.

Aside from women's specific use of lexical items like color names, women also use weaker expletives than men. Lakoff gives the following two sentences as examples:

- (a) Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.
- (b) Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again. (p. 10)

In Lakoff's opinion, it is safe to assume that people would classify

the first sentence as typical of "women's language," the second as "men's language." "This lexical choice is the result of a socialization process which teaches women not to swear." Lakoff says that the "ability to use strong particles like 'shit' and 'hell' is, of course, only incidental to the inequity that exists between the sexes rather than its cause" (p. 11).

Empty or "Personal" Adjectives

It is in a similar manner that Lakoff discusses what she calls empty adjectives. I felt this label to be misleading and so for the purposes of this study I have chosen to label them "personal" adjectives. Lakoff writes, "There is, for instance, a group of adjectives which have, besides their specific and literal meanings, another use, that of indicating the speaker's approbation or admiration for something" (pp. 11-12). Robin Lakoff devised a list of neutral adjectives which both women and men use and a list which is largely confined to women's speech.

<u>neutral</u>	<u>women only</u>
great	adorable
terrific	charming
cool	sweet
neat	lovely
	divine

The words in the "women only" column denote an emotional approval of the trivial--things which are unimportant to the world at large.

These adjectives don't communicate anything except a speaker's own warm feeling about the thing being spoken of. They do not objectively describe something, but merely report on a subjective, personal feeling. Lakoff provides the following example:

(a) What a terrific idea!

(b) What a divine idea!

She feels that (a) might be used under any conditions by a speaker but that (b) is more restricted. Of (b) she writes, "Probably it is used appropriately . . . only in case the speaker feels the idea referred to to be essentially frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the world at large--only an amusement for the speaker herself" (p. 12). The concepts to which personal adjectives are applied are not relevant to the real world of (male) influence and power.

Similarly, in her book Male/Female Language, Mary Ritchie Key found that women tended to use reduplicated forms of adjectives such as "teeny-tiny" and "itsy-bitsy." Her studies revealed that women tended to "use words which emphasized femininity such as adorable, darling, pretty, precious and sweet" (p. 75). Men, on the other hand, used forms which emphasized their masculinity: "barbed, bristly, leathery and lusty." Key's studies confirmed role identification in the use of language.

Robin Lakoff addresses the issue of role identification in language in this way.

. . . the overall effect of "women's language"--
meaning both language restricted in use to women

and language descriptive of women alone--is this:
 it submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying
 her the means of expressing herself strongly, on
 one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest
 triviality in subject matter and uncertainty
 about it." (p. 7)

Tag Questions

The third characteristic Lakoff cites as typical of women's speech is the use of question intonation in conjunction with declaratives and tag questions. A tag question is intermediate between an outright statement and a yes or no question. For example: John is going, isn't he? Here, the "isn't he" ends the sentence with rising intonation.

Lakoff writes, "These sentence types provide a means whereby a speaker can avoid committing herself and thereby avoid coming into conflict with the addressee" (p. 16). While Lakoff admits that she does not have precise statistical evidence that women use more tag questions than men, the sociolinguistic evidence indicates that "little girls are indeed taught to talk like little ladies, in that their speech is in many ways more polite than that of boys or men, and the reason for this [the use of tag questions] is that politeness involves an absence of strong statement, and women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements" (p. 19). One can use the tag formation without sounding uncertain if he ends

the tag without the rising inflection. If the speaker keeps the same intonation until the end of the sentence, then the "isn't he" (as in "John is here, isn't he?") is no longer a question but a self-confirmation.

Related to this use of tag questions is the difference in men's and women's intonation patterns. Lakoff writes,

There is a peculiar sentence intonation pattern,
found in English as far as I know only among women,
which has the form of declarative answer to a
question, . . . but has the rising inflection

When will dinner be ready?

Oh . . . around six o'clock? (p. 17)

It is in such a syntactic structure that women carry "talking like a lady" to an extreme. One likely consequence of women using this rising intonation is that the questioner is placed in the position of having to answer the question, thus the control of the exchange lies with him. The impression made by the speaker who uses this question intonation is "she can't make up her mind" and "she isn't sure of herself." According to Key, "Women tend to add the tag question, not because of lack of information, but to reinforce the feminine image of dependency and the desire not to appear aggressive and forward" (p. 76). Lakoff's findings seem to reaffirm Key's research.

Hedges

According to Robin Lakoff, the fourth characteristic of women's language is a parallel phenomenon to that of the tag question. This concerns a frequent use of modifiers which serve as hedges. These hedges are phrases like well, y'know, I guess, I wonder and kinda. Lakoff admits that anyone may use these hedges in everyday speech, but "women do it more, precisely because they are socialized to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn't nice or ladylike or even feminine" (p. 54).

Lakoff recognizes that these phrases are legitimate when the speaker is uncertain about what she is saying or cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement. But these hedges, like the tag question, appear more frequently in women's speech, even when they are perfectly certain of the truth, as an apology for making an assertion at all. Lakoff writes, "The use of these hedges arises out of a fear of seeming too masculine by being assertive and saying things directly" (p. 54).

Intensive So

The fifth characteristic of women's speech is use of the intensive so. Lakoff states, "Here we have an attempt to hedge on one's strong feelings as though to say: I feel strongly about this but I dare not make it clear how strong."

Lakoff contrasts the following sentences:

I like him very much.

I like him so much.

She suggests, "To say 'I like him very much' would be to say precisely that you like him to a great extent. To say 'I like him so much' weasels on that intensity" (p. 55). Once again the intensive so serves the same function as the hedge and the tag question. This provides a buffer, a way to avoid expressing strong emotions or making strong assertions, which, as Lakoff points out, is not viewed as ladylike by our society.

Hypercorrect and Polite Grammar

The final characteristic of women's language is the use of hypercorrect grammar and superpolite forms. Throughout her book, Language and Women's Place, Robin Lakoff illustrates how women's speech is not typically assertive or profane, as well as how it remains within the boundaries of what our society deems as ladylike. The use of hypercorrect grammar is another way that women's speech confines itself to these societal expectations. Women are not supposed to talk rough. Studies have revealed that girls are less likely to drop their g's (on words such as singing) than boys of the same age. Similarly, little boys are less apt to be scolded for using ain't.

Generally women are viewed as being the pre-servers of literacy and culture, at least in Middle America, where literacy and culture are

viewed as being somewhat suspect in a male.

(That is, in cultures where learning is valued for itself, men are apt to be the guardians of culture and preservers of grammar.) In cultures where book larnin is the schoolmarm's domain, this job will be relegated to the women." (p. 55)

In addition to being concerned with correctness in their speech, women are also supposed to speak more politely than men. Lakoff observed that ". . . women are supposedly the repositories of tact and know the right things to say to other people . . . Women are supposed to be particularly careful to say please and thank you . . . certainly a woman who fails at these tasks is apt to be in more trouble than a man" (p. 55). She feels that a man who forgets these conventions of politeness is more likely to be indulgently overlooked than a woman. Yet, one might question Lakoff's hypothesis here by asking the relevance of education and class in determining the appropriateness of male use of hyper-correct grammar.

Upon reviewing Lakoff's six characteristics of women's speech and the results of the Crosby-Nyquist experiment, I began to wonder if American playwrights, for example, perceived and projected these characteristics more in the dialogue of their female characters than in their male characters. I chose plays, specifically, for the abundance of readily available dialogue.

Based on Lakoff's analysis of the six characteristics of women's language, I intend to examine three plays to determine whether these

characteristics are indeed more marked in the female characters' speech than in the males'. I will focus on the dialogue of Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire, the Young Woman in Machinal, and Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. I chose these three characters because each functions in a wide range of situations (each portrays very different roles) in the play she appears in. I will then compare their dialogue with that of their male counterparts: Stanley Kowalski, The Husband, and George. For my report I will use a statistical method of comparison similar to the one employed in the Crosby-Nyquist study. I intend to count the occurrences of the six characteristics per one hundred lines of dialogue. From my findings I hope to determine whether these three American playwrights, Tennessee Williams, Sophie Treadwell, and Edward Albee, share in Lakoff's expectation that women use this kind of language and thus portray their female characters' language as different from their male characters' in terms of the six characteristics.

When reading the dialogue of Blanche DuBois , Tennessee Williams' neurotic southern belle of A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), one almost gets the feeling that a poet is speaking.

BLANCHE: (Near him, facing him) Don't you just
love these long rainy afternoons in New Orleans
when an hour isn't just an hour--but a little bit
of eternity dropped in your hands--and who knows

what to do with it?⁸

Throughout the play Blanche uses language beautifully, and according to Lakoff's six characteristics, very much like a woman. Blanche invariably uses more of the six characteristics per one hundred lines of dialogue than her antagonist, Stanley Kowalski.

Blanche shrinks from using profanity or obscene expressions. In the entire three-act play she uses only one expletive and that is the word "hell." Blanche is motivated to use this word in a fevered speech about all the death she endured at Belle Reve.

. . . . You'd never suspect there was the struggle
for breath and bleeding. You didn't dream, but I
saw! Saw! Saw! And now you sit there telling
me with your eyes that I let the place go.

(Stella crosses - Blanche follows, holds her)

How in the hell did you think all that sickness
and dying was paid for? . . . (p. 16)

There are many places in the play where Blanche uses weaker expletives, a characteristic which Robin Lakoff points to as a typically feminine lexical choice.

STANLEY: Where are the papers? In the trunk?

BLANCHE: Everything I own is in that trunk.

(Stanley goes to trunk, begins rummaging in top
drawer) What in the name of heaven are you think-
ing of? (p. 28)

Here Blanche uses the weaker "name of heaven" instead of the stronger expletive "hell." Even when Stanley is grilling Blanche about the papers on her lost plantation home she refuses to be profane. Blanche substituted the nicer, weaker, "Gracious" for "God" in a bit of dialogue with Mitch, her promising suitor:

MITCH: (Looks at Blanche) So you are in the teaching profession?

BLANCHE: (Moves down to opposite Mitch) Yes. Ah. Yes . . .

MITCH: (Fussing with lantern, swings bracket downstage) Grade school or high school or --?

STANLEY: (Bellowing) Hey, Mitch! (Starts upstage. Men restrain him)

MITCH: (Bellowing back) Coming!

(Blanche collapses into chair by dressing table.

Stanley sits glowering, resumes game.)

BLANCHE: Gracious, what lung power! I teach high school. In Laurel. (pp. 38-39)

These two scenes are particularly interesting in that we see Blanche, whom we know from earlier in the scene with Stella to be perfectly capable of using strong expletives, almost purposefully weakening her expressions. What is common to both of these scenes is that they are incidents where it is to Blanche's advantage to be vulnerable. In the first scene she is being challenged by Stanley, and in the second scene she is flirting with Mitch. Perhaps Blanche

is merely socialized not to use these strong particles.

Blanche also engages in fine color discriminations.

BLANCHE: (With difficulty in being coherent)

And, Stella -- that cool yellow silk -- the boucle --

see if it's crushed. If it's not too crushed

I'll wear it and on that lapel that silver and

turquoise pin in the shape of a sea horse . . .

(p. 96)

In sharp contrast to Blanche's weaker lexical choices is the rough talk of Stanley Kowalski. Stanley uses seven times as many expletives as Blanche. In his worries about his prospective holdings in his wife's former plantation home he uses the word "hell."

STANLEY: What do you mean to tell me--she didn't

show you no papers, no deed of sale or nothing

like that?

STELLA: (Turning away to dressing table, finished

dressing) It seems like it wasn't sold.

STANLEY: Well, what in hell was it, give away?

To charity? (p. 22)

Stanley uses the expletive "Jesus" in a scene which displays his insensitivity toward Mitch.

MITCH: (Stanley deals cards. Mitch sits) Well,

I ought to go home pretty soon.

STANLEY: Shut up.

MITCH: I got a sick mother. She don't go to sleep until I get in at night.

STANLEY: Then why don't you stay home with her?

MITCH: She says to go out, so I go, but I don't enjoy it. All the while I keep wondering how she is.

STANLEY: Aw, for the sake of Jesus, will you go home then! (p. 31)

Blanche frequently displays Lakoff's second characteristic, "personal" adjectives. She tells Stella to open her "pretty mouth and talk," and that "I bought some nice clothes to meet all your lovely friends in."

Lakoff writes that personal adjectives express an emotional reaction to the thing being spoken of. It seems that Blanche has an emotional reaction to almost everything. She uses pretty frequently. "Excuse me while I slip on my pretty new dress," she says to Stanley (p. 25). She comments on Mitch's cigarette case. "What a pretty case. Silver?" (p. 36) In the shock of spilling a Coca-Cola on herself she says, "Right on my pretty white skirt" (p. 57).

When Blanche sees the Birthday cake Stella has prepared for her she reacts emotionally and with another typical use of the personal adjective pretty.

BLANCHE: (Rises. Moving, crosses between rooms)

Yes. Oh, those pretty, pretty little candles.

(Stella lights match. Blanche rushes forward and blows it out. Stands at left of Stella) Oh, don't burn them, Stella! . . . You ought to save them for baby's birthdays. Oh, I hope candles are going to glow in his life, and I hope that his eyes are going to be like candles, like two blue candles lighted in a white cake!

STANLEY: (Crosses above to bathroom, speaks near bathroom door.) What poetry! (Goes into bathroom)
(p. 78)

This scene illustrates Blanche's over emotional use of the language and shows Stanley's insensitivity to Blanche as well.

Blanche and Stanley both use tag-questions throughout the play, but their reasons for doing so are quite different. Blanche uses the tag question as a way of "toning down" her statements. When Blanche is lecturing Stella about Stanley she uses a tag question at the end of a rather impassioned speech.

BLANCHE: . . . Well--if you'll forgive me--he's common!

STELLA: Why, yes, I suppose he is.

BLANCHE: Suppose! You can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you suppose that any part of a gentleman's in his nature!

Oh, if he was just ordinary! (Stanley rises and listens) -- Just--plain--but good and whole-

some, but--No--. There's something downright--
 bestial--about him! You're hating me for saying
 this, aren't you? (Moves down left) (p. 50)

In spite of all of Blanche's ravings about Stanley's crudeness she ends her dialogue with the tag question "aren't you?", thus seeking Stella's approval of what she has just said. Such inability to assert oneself forcefully is characteristic of women's speech style, according to Robin Lakoff.

Most of the tag questions Blanche employs in the play are like the one seeking Stella's approval. She uses a tag question with Mitch in a conversation about his mother.

MITCH: She won't live long. Maybe just a
 few months, and she worries because I'm not settled.
 She wants me to be settled down before she-- (His
 voice is hoarse with emotion. Looks away from
 Blanche)

BLANCHE: You love her very much, don't you? (p. 67)

In this instance Blanche uses a tag question which shows her insecurity about discussing the sensitive subject of Mitch's dying mother.

Blanche uses twice as many tag questions as Stanley, but he uses them for a different reason than she does. Stanley does not wish to gain anyone's approval with his questions, nor is he uncertain of his statements as Blanche is. His tag questions are used as a form of interrogating whomever he is speaking to. He broaches the topic

of Blanche's tragic marriage with a tag question.

STANLEY: You were married once, weren't you?

BLANCHE: Yes, when I was quite young.

STANLEY: What happened?

BLANCHE: The boy--the boy died . . . I'm afraid
I'm going to be sick. (p. 19)

Stanley also uses tag questions as a way of interrogating his friends, in order to manipulate them and get his own way.

STANLEY: (Into phone) . . . No I don't wanta bowl
at Riley's. I had a little trouble with Riley last
week. I'm the team captain, ain't I? All right,
then, we're not gonna bowl at Riley's, we're
gonna bowl at the West Side or the Gala! (p. 79)

With the tag question "I'm the team captain, ain't I?" Stanley is not seeking confirmation. He is well aware that he is the team captain. Here the tag question construction is used as a powerful, rather than as an apologetic, linguistic device.

As A Streetcar Named Desire unfolds, we watch Blanche DuBois' personality slowly break into total collapse. It seems fitting that Blanche's dialogue should be overflowing with hedges. Lakoff writes, " . . . these hedges do have their uses when one really has a legitimate need for protection or for deference . . . but used to excess hedges . . . give the impression that the speaker lacks authority or doesn't know what he's talking about" (p. 54).

In the play we see that Blanche indeed lacks this authority and in the final stages of her collapse she really does not know what she is talking about. The hedge "I guess" abounds in Blanche's speech. She tells Stella:

I guess that is what is meant by being in love. (p. 15)

I guess you're hoping I'll say I'll put up at a hotel . . . (p. 13)

I guess he's just not the type that goes for jasmine perfume. (p. 30)

I guess I am just feeling nervous about our relationship. (p. 57)

She says to Mitch:

I guess you are used to girls that like to be lost. (p. 62)

It's just--well--I guess it is just that I have--old fashioned ideals. (p. 65)

Lakoff writes, "'I guess' means something like 'I would like to say to you, but I'm not sure I can (because I don't know if it's right, because I don't know if I have the right . . . and so on), so I'll merely put it forth as a suggestion'" (p. 55). Blanche is aware of this and so uses "I guess" as a way of not being accountable for what she is saying. In the entire play Stanley uses only two hedges while Blanche uses thirty-four.

The use of intensive so is closely related to the hedge. Lakoff

writes that the use of so is "a device you'd use if you felt it unseemly to show you had strong emotions, or to make strong assertions" (p. 55). Once again Blanche uses many more so's than Stanley. When Blanche speaks about the sensitive topic of her failing mental health she uses so.

I was so exhausted by all I had been through
my--nerves just broke. (p. 12)

After seeing Stanley strike Stella she is afraid and she tells Mitch,

There's so much confusion in the world. Thank
you for being so kind. (p. 43)

Blanche's one enjoyment is her hot baths.

Oh I feel so good after my long hot bath. I
feel so good and cool and rested. (p. 75)

The use of so serves the same function for Blanche that the hedges do. Both are linguistic devices for diluting statements, out of fear of seeming too assertive. Or, as with Blanche's following statement, out of fear of being held accountable for the degree of the adjective which so modifies.

We must consider at this point Blanche's psychological condition in conjunction with her use of weaker forms such as so. We know that Blanche is in the process of mental collapse as the play unfolds. This raises the question of how many of these six characteristics are actually sex related rather than just a reflection of

her weakened psychological state. The following example illustrates Blanche's psychological vulnerability:

STELLA: People talk. Who cares? (Thunder)

BLANCHE: (Rises, follows Stella) I haven't been so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve started to slip through my fingers.

(p. 56)

Stanley uses only three so's in the play, and as is typical of Stanley's character, those are used as a form of sarcasm directed at Blanche. In one of his first confrontations with Blanche Stanley makes this sarcastic use of so.

STANLEY: (Seizing her right wrist) If I didn't know you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you. (Releases her hands)

BLANCHE: Such as what?

STANLEY: (Pushing her hand aside) Don't play so dumb. You know what! (p. 27)

According to Robin Lakoff, women's speech is characteristically more polite and more correct than men's language. This politeness consists of being careful to say please and thank you. The correctness of women's language is typical of the role women play in society as preservers of gentility and literacy. Once again, Blanche is true to Lakoff's hypothesis. She is always sure to be polite. Even when she is tired she excuses herself to Eunice. "If you'll

excuse me I'm just about to drop" (p. 9).

Blanche uses please and thank you frequently throughout the play. Stanley uses neither. Perhaps Blanche's most touching display of politeness is in the final scene of the play when the doctor and the nurse from the mental institution come to take her. As she walks through the room of men playing poker she says, "Please don't get up. I'm only passing through" (p. 100). Even as the doctor approaches her she is still polite.

BLANCHE: (Slowly retreating in panic) I don't
know you! I don't know you! I want to be--left
alone--please! (p. 101)

It is perhaps invalid to compare Stanley's and Blanche's use of correct grammatical forms. Stanley is from a lower, less educated class than Blanche and that often shows up in his dialogue.

When Blanche is frightened by an unfamiliar noise he says, "Them's cats" (p. 19). He tells Blanche, "Some men are took in by this Hollywood glamor stuff and some men are not" (p. 26). He often drops g's from words as well. "Naw, she's gettin a drink" (p. 90). He asks Stella, "How many candles you stickin in that cake?" (p. 77).

Lakoff writes that "It has been found that, from a very young age, little boys 'drop' their g's much more than little girls: boys say 'singin,' 'goin' and so on while girls are less apt to" (p. 55). Blanche, whose former occupation in the play is that of English teacher, uses the language correctly all the time. She uses

the pronoun "I" correctly. "But you are the one that abandoned Belle Reve, not I!" (p. 15). Even when she is upset she still uses correct grammar. When Stanley smashes beer bottles on the kitchen floor, she has this exchange with Stella.

BLANCHE: (Pushing broom aside) Stop it! Put it down! I won't have you cleaning up after him!

STELLA: Then who's going to do it? Are you?

(Hands broom to Blanche)

BLANCHE: (Dropping broom behind trunk) I --?

I! (p. 46)

Overall, Blanche uses more of the six characteristics than Stanley. Her speech reflects her inability to assert herself as well as the weakness of her mental state. In A Streetcar Named Desire Blanche's last hope for happiness, marriage to Mitch, is ruined when Stanley exposes her past, rapes her, and subsequently has her committed to an asylum. Against this background it is difficult to determine whether Blanche's submissive language style is the result of her sex, or of her victimization.

Although feminist in nature, Sophie Treadwell's 1928 tragic drama, Machinal, contains a character very similar to Blanche. Machinal was Treadwell's attempt to dramatize the tragic plight of a young woman held captive by the traditional role society had placed her in. In ten brief episodes the play unfolds one young woman's "pathetic and utterly frustrated pursuit of happiness."⁹ Much

of her frustration is communicated in her dialogue. Courted by a man she does not love, but who can offer her a secure future away from the machinery of working nine to five, the Young Woman uses this series of frantic tag questions about love in a scene with her mother.

Tell me, . . . love is real, ain't it? It
isn't just you fall in love, don't you--and then--
your skin oughtn't to curl--ought it--when he comes
near you--ought it? That's wrong, ain't it? You
don't get over that, do you--ever, do you or don't
you? (p. 230)

Her mother responds with a confused "Do you what?" and the Young Woman replies with even more tag questions.

Do you get used to it--so that after a while
it doesn't matter? Or don't you? Does it always
matter? You ought to be in love, musn't you?
That changes everything doesn't it--or does it?
Maybe if you just like a person it's all right--
is it? (p. 230)

Later in the play the young woman seeks love from a stranger she meets in a speakeasy. After spending the day in his hotel room as his lover she uses several tag questions which communicate her apprehension. She asks her lover, "You've had a lot of women, haven't you?" (p. 240). As Lakoff has pointed out, tag questions are

used by speakers who are uncertain of what they are saying and who need confirmation from their listener. Insecure about her lover's feelings toward her and needing to hear his words of assurance, she uses the following tag question formation: "We belong together! And we're going to stick together, ain't we?" (p. 240).

Lakoff has written that, like tag questions, hedges serve to weaken a speaker's statement. Hedges occur frequently in the Young Woman's speech. She is a victim of those around her and her speech indicates this. In a series of conversations with her mother she uses the hedges maybe, I suppose, and I guess. "Maybe I am crazy--I don't know" (p. 231). She also says, "I'm grown up, Ma." Her mother asks her, "What do you mean by that?" "Nothing much--I guess" (pp. 229-230). Confused about her future she says, "I suppose I got to marry somebody" (p. 231). Her mother replies, "So you're going to marry him?" She answers, "I suppose so" (p. 231).

When she first meets her lover in the speakeasy she uses several hedges in this exchange.

FIRST MAN: You're married--huh?

YOUNG WOMAN: Yes--I am.

FIRST MAN: All right with me.

YOUNG WOMAN: Some men don't seem to like a woman after she's married.

FIRST MAN: What's the difference?

YOUNG WOMAN: Depends on the man, I guess. (p. 237)

As the girlfriend who introduced the Young Woman to her lover

conspicuously leaves the bar to sleep with her own lover, the Young Woman tries to cover her shock with hedges.

FIRST MAN: You didn't fall for that business
gag--did you--when they went off?

YOUNG WOMAN: Well, I thought they wanted to be
alone, probably, but--

YOUNG MAN: And how--

YOUNG WOMAN: Oh--so that's it? (p. 238)

The Young Woman is railroaded into going to her lover's apartment with him. As they are leaving the speakeasy he offers to get some liquor to take with them.

FIRST MAN: (rises) Wait a minute--I got to pay
the damage . . . (She sits and he starts away.)
and I'll get us a bottle of something to take
along.

YOUNG WOMAN: No--don't.

FIRST MAN: Why not?

YOUNG WOMAN: I just meant I don't think I'll need
anything to drink.

Here the use of the hedge constructions "I just meant" and "I don't think" severely weaken the Young Woman's statement, making her seem indecisive. In fact, the lover buys a bottle in spite of her weak protests.

In the book Male/Female Language, Mary Ritchie Key discusses

the use of modals as hedge forms which are typical of women's speech.

When speakers refer to the kinds of action and the possibilities, probabilities, and doubtfulness of events that did or will take place . . . they use the modal class of words--such as can, could, should, would Females use more of these words which show indefiniteness, inconclusiveness and uncertainty. (p. 76)

The Young Woman uses many of these modal hedges in her dialogue.

I should be ashamed of myself. (p. 227)

I should be thankful. (p. 243)

I must get out. (p. 228)

I must get air. (p. 228)

You must let me get away. (p. 244)

In the final episode of Machinal the Young Woman is on trial for the murder of her husband. She uses weakened hedge forms in her testimony. The Young Woman tells the prosecuting attorney that the alleged murderers were not Negroes but men who were "Just a little dark" and that she could tell her husband had been hurt by them because "there was a kind of light in the room Probably it was the moonlight" (p. 246). Hedges like "kind of," "a little," and "probably" make her appear to be uncertain of what really happened on the night of the murder. This weakens the validity

of her testimony. She thus appears to be lying to the court and is found guilty and executed.

The Young Woman's husband has few speaking parts in the play, but those lines he does say contain none of Lakoff's six characteristics. Untypical of the language style discussed by Lakoff, the dialogue of the husband is full of commands. The majority of these commands are directed toward the Young Woman. When she tells him as her boss that her typewriter is out of order, he says, "Use the one in my room" (p. 228). He orders her to give him affection. "Come here and give us a kiss. (She goes to him. He puts her on his knee.) Say--stay there--you got to learn to relax" (p. 232). He even orders her not to move around. "Come on, sit down. Come on, sit down and rest" (p. 343).

Throughout the play the husband uses forceful, direct language. He even orders his wife about in the maternity ward of the hospital as she is recovering from giving birth.

Everybody's got to brace up--and face things.
That's what makes the world go around. I know all
you've been through . . . Oh, yes, I do! . . . But
you've got to brave up now! Make an effort! Pull
yourself together! . . . Oh I've been down, but
I haven't stayed down! . . . Now you got to brace
up. Having a baby's natural. (pp. 234-235)

In one of the final scenes of Machinal the Young Woman is having a mental breakdown and begs her husband to let her get away for a

rest.

YOUNG WOMAN: You must let me get away.

HUSBAND: What's the matter?

YOUNG WOMAN: You must let me get away.

HUSBAND: You'll be alright. (p. 244)

The dialogue here is characteristic of the husband's insensitivity to his wife's problems.

Because the play was written in 1928 the characteristic concerning lexical choices such as obscene expletives is not evident in the play. Sophie Treadwell was undoubtedly aware of the fact that the American audiences and censors of the twenties would not accept the use of obscenity on the stage. Several of Lakoff's characteristics, such as "personal" adjectives, intensive so and grammatically correct forms are also absent from the play as well. The Young Woman uses only one "personal" adjective in the entire play. She tells her husband, "I've been feeling terribly nervous lately" (p. 244). She also uses only one intensive so. Concerning giving birth to her unwanted child she says, "Maybe if you love them they don't weigh so heavy" (p. 235).

The test concerning grammatically correct forms is invalid for Machinal as neither the Young Woman nor her husband is educated. They both use improper grammatical expressions. The Young Woman uses ain't several times in the play. "And we're going to stick together, ain't we?" (p. 240). She asks her mother, "Love is real, ain't it?" (p. 230). The husband tells the Young Woman to "leave

the door open so's we can talk" (p. 233). He says that next year they will go to Europe "so's I can buy a Swiss watch right there in Switzerland" (p. 233).

No one is particularly polite in Machinal as it is a play about human frustration. However, the Young Woman uses a form of politeness in that she often pleads with those about her. She says to her mother, "Oh, Ma, let me alone" (p. 229). She says to herself concerning her husband, "When he touches me my blood runs cold-- oh, don't. Please don't!" (p. 228). She tells her husband to leave her alone. "No! Don't. Please don't" (p. 233). She tells her doctor in the maternity ward, "Oh let me alone! Let me alone! I've submitted enough. I won't submit any more I'm empty" (p. 235). Although pleading is not precisely a polite form, the pleading in the Young Woman's dialogue makes her appear to be weak and ineffectual against those around her.

Like Blanche in Streetcar, the Young Woman uses more of the six characteristics than her male counterpart. Although the Young Woman finally kills her oppressive husband, she is as much a victim as Blanche. She is brought to trial, publicly humiliated and eventually executed for her crime. Her ability to assert herself is thwarted by her husband. As with Blanche, we must wonder if the Young Woman's use of these six characteristics is due to her sex or to her oppression.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Edward Albee's 1962 portrait of a decaying marriage in the land of academe, provides an interesting

paradox in view of Robin Lakoff's hypothesis. Throughout the play it is George, and not Martha, who uses the six characteristics of "women's language" more in his speech. In regard to item one, particularities of lexical choice, Lakoff has stated that women use weaker or less blasphemous expletives than men do. This is definitely not the case with George and Martha. In the first one-hundred lines of dialogue alone Martha uses ten expletives and George uses only two. Throughout the play Martha uses 2.8 times as many as George.

Not only do expletives occur more frequently in Martha's speech, but also those which she does use are often more obscene than George's. She calls George "you prick"¹⁰ and a "mother" (p. 172), whereas the most obscene phrase George uses is when he calls Martha a "Satanic Bitch." Martha even swears in reference to her son: "I never cornered the son of a bitch in my life!" (p. 120). Most of the time Martha uses expletives when she talks to or about George.

I'll talk about any goddamn thing I want to,
George. (p. 29)

The son of a bitch is going to read a book. (p. 169)

Before I'm through with you you'll wish you'd
died in that automobile, you bastard. (p. 154)

You know why the S.O.B. hates my father? (p. 77)

The hell I won't. Keep away from me, you bastard.
(p. 137)

George's speech one again defies Lakoff's hypothesis in its use of "personal" adjectives. Lakoff has stated that these adjectives

are used by female speakers to express an emotional reaction to things which are trivial or unimportant to the real world.

George employs the following "personal" adjectives in his dialogue:

Well, it's an allegory, really--probably--but it can be read as straight, cozy prose . . . and it's all about a nice young couple who come out of the middle west. (p. 142)

My God, you're a wicked woman. (p. 71)

You have ugly talents, Martha. (p. 132)

Isn't that a wonderful sound? (p. 42)

What a terrible thing to do . . . to Martha's snapdragons. (p. 197)

It is interesting to note that in Male/Female Language, Mary Ritchie Key confirmed role identification in the use of language. She found that women tend to use adjectives which express their femininity and men those which express masculinity. Not surprisingly, those scenes where Martha is being the most aggressive, and thereby George the most passive, is where we find this traditionally feminine characteristic of using "personal" adjectives prevailing in George's speech.

MARTHA: (ugly) It was a scream!

GEORGE: (patiently) It was very funny; yes.

MARTHA: (after a moment's consideration) You make me puke!

GEORGE: (thinks about it . . . then . . .)
 That wasn't a very nice thing to say, Martha.
 MARTHA: That wasn't what?
 GEORGE: . . . a very nice thing to say. (p. 13)

This raises the question once again whether language use is situational rather than sexual.

In regard to Lakoff's third item, the use of question intonation and tag questions, it is indeed difficult to read properly for intonation in any dialogue unless the playwright indicates the specific intonation in his stage directions. However, tag questions are easily recognizable and as with the two characteristics before, George uses many more than Martha--four times as many.

George uses tag questions to (1) seek information and (2) to gain confirmation:

- (1) Your wife doesn't have any hips . . . has she . . . does she? (p. 39)
- (2) Oh my God that would be a joke, wouldn't it? (p. 82)

Robin Lakoff states that women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements. The tag question enables the speaker to buffer his statement, such as George does when he talks to Nick about selective genetics and test tube babies:

You people are going to make them in a test tube,
 aren't you? (p. 40)

Martha uses only three tag questions in the three-act play, and those serve not to express her insecurity but to sexually tease Nick. When George surprises the company by pretending to shoot Martha with a toy gun, Martha turns to Nick and says, "You don't need any props, do you baby?" (p. 61).

By using tag questions, Martha seeks Nick's attention, which requires a response from him as the listener. "Hey you are strong, aren't you? Well, we can amuse ourselves, can't we?" (p. 169). Ironically, Martha turns the tag question into a strong statement for the purpose of venting her sexual aggression, much the same way Stanley uses language sarcastically in A Streetcar Named Desire.

Perhaps the greatest variance in George and Martha's speech style occurs in their use of modifiers for the purpose of hedging on statements. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? George seems to be master of the hedge. He uses 1.5 times as many as Martha. Lakoff writes that these hedges--words like well, you know, I guess--are employed by a speaker who fears appearing aggressive by making direct statements. Phrases such as sort of, actually and really, which George uses bountifully, serve the purpose of diluting a statement.

No, what we did, actually, was . . . we sort of danced around. (p. 123)

What we did, actually, if you really want to know, what we did actually is try to figure out what you two were talking about. (p. 48)

I really don't know, Martha. (p. 6)

I suppose it is. I suppose it's pretty remarkable

. . . considering how old you are. (p. 14)

What I mean is . . . what do you think they really

talk about . . . or don't you care? (p. 42)

No, no, she doesn't . . . I would; I mean if I

were her . . . She . . . I would. (p. 90)

Actually, I'm rather worried about you. (p. 156)

Well, eventually, probably yes. (p. 97)

It is only with characteristic five, intensive use of so, that Martha supports Robin Lakoff's hypothesis about women's language style. In this single category Martha uses the word so more than George. Lakoff says that women use so more than men in order to say, "I fell strongly about this but I dare not say how strong" (p. 56). Of the seven times Martha uses so in the play, five of those are in reference to her imaginary son.

MARTHA: And as he grew . . . and as he grew . .

oh! so wise! . . . he walked evenly between us . . .

(She spreads her hands) . . . a hand out to each

of us for what we could offer by way of support,

affection, teaching, even love . . . and these

hands, still, to hold us off a bit, for mutual

protection, to protect us all from George's . . .

weakness . . . and my . . . necessary greater

strength . . . to protect himself . . . and us.

GEORGE: In memoria aeterna erit justus: ab auditione

mala non timebit.

MARTHA: So wise; so wise.

NICK: (To George) What is this? What are you doing?

GEORGE: Shhhh.

HONEY: Shhhh.

NICK: (Shrugging) O.K.

MARTHA: So beautiful; so wise. (p. 222)

It seems strange for the usually aggressive Martha to use this passive characteristic 3.8 times more than George. But it is understandable when she uses it in reference to her mythical son. He is, as George discovers, the one soft spot in her otherwise brassy armor. She uses so as a means of protecting herself from expressing how very deeply she feels about a son who does not even exist.

Throughout her book Robin Lakoff writes that women's speech is typically non-assertive, remaining within the boundaries of what society deems ladylike. Characteristic six, the use of correct or polite grammatical forms, helps women to meet the expectation that they all be keepers of the language. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? it is George and not Martha who displays this "school marm's" fussiness for the language. He corrects others' grammar several times. He corrects himself: "Your wife doesn't have any hips . . . has she . . . does she?" (p. 166). He corrects Martha:

MARTHA: (By way of irritable explanation) Well, .

I can't be expected to remember everything. I

meet fifteen new teachers and their goddamn wives
 . . . present company outlawed, of course . . .
 (HONEY nods, smiles sillily) . . . and I'm supposed
 to remember everything. (Pause) So? He's a
 biologist. Good for him. Biology's even better.
 It's less . . . abstruse.
 GEORGE: Abstract.
 MARTHA: ABSTRUSE! In the sense of recondite.
 (Sticks her tongue out)

In the amusing first scene of the play when Martha is trying to get George to recall the name of an old Bette Davis movie, he corrects her word choice in this exchange.

MARTHA: Nobody's asking you to remember every
 single goddamn Warner Brothers epic . . . just
 one! One single little epic! Bette Davis gets
 peritonitis in the end . . . she's got this big
 black fright wig she wears all through the picture
 and she gets peritonitis, and she's married to
 Joseph Cotten or something . . .
 GEORGE: . . . Somebody . . . (pp. 4-5)

It is interesting to note that Martha, whose speech is more like that which we would call typically masculine, comments on George's weak speech style.

MARTHA: Have you ever listened to your sentences,

George? Have you ever listened to the way you talk? You're so frigging . . . convoluted . . . that's what you are. You talk like you were writing one of your stupid papers. (pp. 155-156)

George provides an interesting exception to Robin Lakoff's hypothesis. George is not female, yet he uses the six characteristics which Lakoff has labeled as typical of "women's language style." In Language and Woman's Place, she provides a clue to George's atypical "feminine" use of the language. In this play, George is portrayed as a middle-aged history professor, an academician. On this subject, Lakoff writes,

Another group that has, ostensibly at least, taken itself out of the search for power and money is that of academic men. They don't really work, they are supported in their frivolous pursuits by others, what they do doesn't really count in the real world Therefore it is not too surprising that many academic men . . . may violate many of these sacrosanct rules . . . they often use women's language. (p. 14)

Robin Lakoff has made certain generalizations about women's language, saying that it tends to be hyperformal and non-assertive. She cites six characteristics as typical of women's speech in our

culture: specific lexical choices, use of empty adjectives, use of question intonation in conjunction with tag questions, use of modifiers as hedges, use of intensive so and the use of hypercorrect or polite grammar. In these three plays Blanche and the Young Woman use more of Robin Lakoff's characteristics than their male counterparts, although I find no evidence that they do so specifically because they are women. These women have one thing in common with George, who is male but uses more of these six characteristics. This commonality is simply that George, like Blanche and the Young Woman, is often unable to assert himself in the face of his stronger, brutish counterpart. Like the two women in their relationships with men, George assumes the role of the weaker one in his marriage to Martha.

George's speech lends itself to the belief of linguists like Cheris Kramer, who feel that many of our attitudes about women's language being weaker are the result of cultural prejudices. It would seem that my study of these three plays indicates that Lakoff's ideas about "women's" language might be better replaced by ideas about "powerless" language, and that the six characteristics Lakoff has called typical of women's language are simply those used by persons of less power, regardless of their sex.

Endnotes

¹ Adelaide Haas, "Male and Female Spoken Language Differences: Stereotypes and Evidence," Psychological Bulletin, 86 (1979), 616-626.

² Susan Phillips, "Sex Differences and Language," Annual Review Anthropology, 9 (1980), 523-544.

³ Carol Edelsky, "Question Intonation and Sex Roles," Language in Society, 8 (1979), 15-32.

⁴ Mary Ritchie Key, Male/Female Language (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press Inc., 1975). All subsequent references will be to this edition and appear in the text.

⁵ Robin Lakoff, Language and Woman's Place (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 53-56. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁶ Cheris Kramer, "Wishy-Washy Mommy Talk," Psychology Today, June 1974, p. 82. All subsequent references are to this publication and appear in the text.

⁷ Faye Crosby and Linda Nyquist, "The Female Register: an empirical study of Lakoff's hypotheses," Language in Society, 6 (1977), 313-322.

⁸ Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1947), p. 55. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁹ Sophie Treadwell, Machinal, in The Best Plays of 1928-29, ed. Burns Mantle (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1929), p. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

¹⁰ Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Pocket Books Inc., 1962), p. 59. All subsequent references will be to this edition and appear in the text.

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SEX-DIFFERENTIATED LANGUAGE VERSUS ROLE-DIFFERENTIATED LANGUAGE;
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF ROBIN LAKOFF'S HYPOTHESES IN THREE PLAYS

by

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One of the most complete analyses of sex-determined differentiation in spoken language was made by Robin Lakoff in Language and Woman's Place, 1975. Men's language, according to Lakoff's thesis, tends to be assertive, adult, and direct. Women's language tends to be hyperformal and nonassertive. Lakoff cites six characteristics of women's speech in our culture, including certain "weak" expletives, adjectives, and verbal "hedges"; frequent use of intensive so; question intonation with statement; and hypercorrect grammar.

Based on Lakoff's analysis of the six characteristics of women's language, I examined three plays to determine whether these characteristics are indeed more marked in the female characters' speech than in the males'. I focused on the dialogue of Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire, Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, and the Young Woman in Machinal. I then compared their dialogue with that of their male counterparts: Stanley Kowalski, George, and The Husband.

Although by no means conclusive, my findings seemed to indicate that these six characteristics are not sex-determined as Lakoff asserts, but rather role-determined. While Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire and the Young Woman in Machinal use more of the six characteristics than their male counterparts, George in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf uses more than his female counterpart, Martha. These women have one thing in common with George. This is simply their inability to assert themselves in the face of their stronger counterparts. Like the two women in their relationships with men, George assumes the role of the weaker one in his marriage to Martha. My study of these three

plays seems to indicate that Lakoff's ideas about "women's" language might better be replaced by ideas about "powerless" language, and that the six characteristics Lakoff has called typical of women's language are simply those used by persons of less power, regardless of their sex.