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## You Talk Like a Girl: Stereotypes about Women's Language

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You Talk Like a Girl:  
Stereotypes about Women's Language

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## Abstract

In her 1973 essay “Language and Woman’s Place,” linguist Robin Lakoff claimed that clear differences exist between the speech of women and men, and that these differences both reflect and perpetuate women’s powerlessness in society. Lakoff’s work became the basis for a substantial number of studies on gendered language since. Outside of academia, assumptions about the existence of “women’s language” are prevalent in popular advice books and manuals directed at women, who are advised to use or avoid certain linguistic features, including those identified by Lakoff nearly fifty years ago. These include the use of empty adjectives, tag questions, hedges, hypercorrect grammar, and super-polite forms.

My study aimed to identify current assumptions about women’s language to uncover the relevance of Lakoff’s claims today and the wisdom of advice directed at women regarding their language behavior. Which linguistic features, both identified by Lakoff and not, are associated with how women use language today?

I distributed a survey containing written dialogues using features associated with women’s language, as identified by Lakoff, or sourced from recent speaking advice for women. Participants were asked to identify the gender of the speakers and their choice. Responses from 600 English-speaking participants confirmed some assumptions about current stereotypes of women’s language (use of specific color terms, super-polite terms, tag questions, and verbosity), but not others (trivialized exclamations, apologies). The qualitative data suggests that stereotypes about gendered language act in concert with other non-language gender stereotypes, making the identification of specific features as women’s language largely contextual.

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## Introduction

Linguist Robin Lakoff's essay (1973) and subsequent book (1975), both titled "Language and Woman's Place," initiated the focused study of the interaction of language and gender. Lakoff relied on her observations as a speaker of English and a woman to conclude that clear differences exist between the speech of women and men and that these differences both reflect and perpetuate women's powerlessness in society. Linguistic features that Lakoff pointed to as indicative of women's language (WL) include the use of empty adjectives (i.e., lovely), tag questions (i.e., that's right, isn't it?), hedges (i.e., I think, perhaps), hypercorrect grammar, and superpolite forms (i.e., overuse of please and thank you). Since the publication of "Language and Woman's Place," sociolinguists have conducted substantial research to investigate the validity of the book's claims. Some research supports Lakoff's claims (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977) while other research refutes them (Dubois & Crouch, 1975), leading Lakoff to subsequently modify, clarify, and retract various elements of her argument.

"Language and Woman's Place" has been influential beyond academic circles as well, such as in popular media and advice manuals for women. In fact, it's nearly impossible to find any discussion of gendered language stereotypes that doesn't include at least one of Lakoff's proposed linguistic features. Whether or not people are aware of Lakoff's work, they rely on her claims to reinforce or refute stereotypes about women's language use. Many believe these stereotypes without knowledge of where they originated or if they are supported by research. The purpose of the proposed study, therefore, is to investigate people's current beliefs in Lakoff's claims. Are stereotypes about language and gender pervasive enough that people will claim to identify

someone's gender based on their usage of these features? To determine if certain stereotypes about gender based on language currently exist, this study addressed the following research questions:

- What linguistic features are associated with how women use language today?
- Have stereotypes about women's language changed?

It is important to note that *women's language* is called such not because it is exclusive to women but because its features are (thought to be) used by women more than men, though this is perhaps the most thoroughly tested theory in the gendered language field of study. It is also important to note that the categories of *men* and *women* are not homogeneous—nothing is true of *all* men, and many men are more different from each other than they are from women. Nor are the labels of *man* and *woman* sufficient to represent all people, especially with our current understanding of gender as a spectrum, not a binary. However, because most humans are raised to recognize these two categories as distinct and to classify all people as belonging to exactly one of them—either male *or* female, not both, not neither, not a different gender entirely—these categories suffice for an examination of stereotypes about the genders. Through investigating these research questions, my goal is to discover if certain stereotypes about gender based on language currently exist, and if so, what the connections are between stereotypes and advice toward women about their language.

## **Literature Review**

There is a wealth of research aimed at investigating whether or not women use certain linguistic features, such as the ones Lakoff identified, more than or differently

than men. However, I am not examining whether or not these language claims are true; instead, I am looking at how these claims have entered popular consciousness, or, in other words, if people believe the claims are true, or at least are aware of them as common stereotypes.

Of course, stereotypes about language and gender didn't originate with "Language and Woman's Place." In 1922, Danish linguist Otto Jespersen published his book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, in which he devoted an entire chapter to "The Woman." His evidence for the difference between men's and women's speech comes largely from literature, like quotes from Cicero, Shakespeare, and Dickens, and folklore, including his own observations and traditional apothegms, such as "the North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for word" from his native Denmark (Jespersen, 1922, p. 258).

Similar to Lakoff, though preceding her by fifty years, Jespersen claims that women prefer "euphemistic substitutes" to "coarse and gross expressions," e.g., "the other place" in place of "hell" (pp. 246-247). In another parallel, Jespersen posits that women use more "adverbs of intensity" than men, such as *quite*, *so*, and *just* (p. 250). While these two ideas have carried into the present day, some of Jespersen's claims about women's language may be less familiar to us reading his book now. For example, he asserts that, while "some men are confirmed punsters," women don't see the point in a pun and "scarcely ever perpetrate one themselves" (p. 249).

Stereotypes about gendered language have changed somewhat since 1922, but not entirely. In 1979, Dr. Adelaide Haas, a professor of communication and women's studies at SUNY New Paltz, conducted a thorough review of the literature about

gendered language differences published since Jespersen's time. Regarding language stereotypes, she found the following:

Women's speech is said to contain more euphemisms, politeness forms, apology, laughter, crying, and unfinished sentences. They are reputed to talk more about home and family and to be more emotional and positively evaluative. Further, women's speech is stereotyped as nonassertive, tentative, and supportive.

Women are also said to talk more than men. (Haas, 1979, p. 623)

While "Language and Woman's Place" may not be the origin for these stereotypes, it certainly led to the proliferation of academic research and popular media with a focus on the specific features Lakoff identified.

Lakoff separated the features she identified as WL into two categories: lexicon and syntax. The lexical features are precise color terms, trivialized expletives, and empty adjectives. The syntactic features are tag questions and superpoliteness. First, Lakoff asserts that women use more precise color terms than men. Looking at a wall, a woman may say the color is "beige, ecru, aquamarine, [or] lavender," but, should a man do the same, "one might well conclude he was either imitating a woman sarcastically, or a homosexual, or an interior decorator" (p. 49). Lakoff's evidence for this comes from a time when she observed "a man helpless with suppressed laughter at a discussion between two other people as to whether a book-jacket was to be described as 'lavender' or 'mauve'" (p. 49).

The next feature Lakoff ascribes to WL is the use of trivialized expletives. Women, she says, use different "meaningless" particles than men (though she acknowledges that such particles do carry meaning) (p. 49). First, women use weaker

expletives to express how they feel. Men will say “shit” or “damn,” where women will say “oh dear” or “goodness” (p. 50). Next, women use different ‘empty adjectives’ than men. These adjectives indicate “the speaker’s approbation or admiration for something” (p. 51); some adjectives are neutral, others are part of WL and therefore acceptable and expected in a woman’s speech, but aberrant in man’s. Lakoff provides a table with some of these adjectives:

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

(p. 51)

Regarding syntax, Lakoff states that women use tag-question formation more than men. Tag-questions, such as *is(n’t) it*, *are(n’t) you*, *do(n’t) we*, *has(n’t) he*, *can(t) they*, are added at the end of a sentence. Lakoff interprets a tag-question as “midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question...less assertive than the former, but more confident than the latter” (p. 54). She identifies several uses of tag-questions, e.g., genuine requests for information and small talk. A use she claims is “much more apt to be used by women than by men,” though without “precise statistical evidence” (p. 55), is to seek corroboration with an opinion. Her example is: “the war in Vietnam is terrible, isn’t it?” (p. 55). She says that this sort of tag is used “when a speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of this claim” (p. 54).

Finally, Lakoff notes that women’s speech is more polite than men’s. Women do this by using more particles in a sentence to “reinforce the notion that it is a request,

rather than an order” (p. 56). “The more one compounds a request,” the more polite the request, “the more characteristic it is of women’s speech, the less of men’s” (p. 57).

Beyond simply identifying features of women’s language, Lakoff states that the purpose of her paper is to “provide diagnostic evidence from language use for one type of inequity that has been claimed to exist in our society: that between the roles of women” (p. 46). Accordingly, she interprets features of WL in this light, as reflective of the “marginality and powerlessness of women” (p. 45). Precise color terms are characteristic of WL because, “since women are not expected to make decisions on important matters, like what kind of job to hold, they are relegated the non-crucial decisions, [such as] deciding whether to name a color ‘lavender’ or ‘mauve’” (p. 49). Men can use stronger expletives than women because “if someone is allowed to show emotions, and consequently does, others may well be able to view him as a real individual in his own right,” and it is considered inappropriate for women to use the same strong expletives “precisely because society does *not* consider her seriously as an individual” (p. 51).

Tag questions can “play a part in not taking a woman seriously or trusting her with any real responsibilities, since ‘she can’t make up her mind,’ and ‘isn’t sure of herself’” (p. 56). Women are taught to speak more politely because “politeness involves an absence of a strong statement, and women’s speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements” (p. 57).

While the premise underlying Lakoff’s paper, that language use can reflect societal inequities, is generally accepted by her academic peers, her specific proposition, that women experience “linguistic discrimination...in the way they are taught

to use language,” which “relegate[s] women to certain subservient functions” (p. 46) is far more contentious. Many sociolinguistic researchers refute her claims about the specific features of WL, or even deny that WL is distinct from men’s language at all.

One reason for this is Lakoff’s lack of evidence. She concedes that “the data on which [she is] basing [her] claims have been gathered mainly by introspection,” including an examination of her own speech, her acquaintances’ speech, and media (e.g., commercials and sitcoms). She has used her “own intuitions” to analyze it (p. 46). She justifies this, in comparison to “more error-proof data-gathering techniques, such as the recording of random conversation,” by noting that all research “is at some point introspective,” when the researcher analyzes the data and because researchers often work with population subgroups that they personally identify with (pp. 46-47). She also points to the pragmatic issue of gathering data from recording random conversations—namely, that there is no guarantee the speakers will “produce evidence of any particular hypothesis” (p. 47). Gathering sufficient data will require artificial elicitation, and Lakoff proposes that she is “as good an artificial source of data as anyone” (p. 47).

Lakoff recognizes the limitations of her methodology, writing that her paper “is meant to suggest one possible approach to the problem, one set of facts,” though, somewhat in contradiction, she also feels that the majority of her claims “will hold for the majority of speakers of English” and in fact maybe be “universal” (p. 47). Her paper certainly fulfills one of its stated purposes, to provide a “taking-off point for further studies” (p. 47), but it is less successful in providing the “diagnostic evidence from language use” (p. 46) that she claims. Consequently, most research that uses

“Language and Women’s Place” as a jumping-off point is focused on providing the empirical evidence the paper lacks.

One such study is Crosby and Nyquist’s (1977) “The Female Register: An Empirical Study of Lakoff’s Hypotheses,” published just four years after Lakoff’s initial paper. They performed three individual studies to examine the presence of WL, which they term “the female register,” in both men’s and women’s speech.

The first study gathered speech samples from three-minute dyadic conversations between people of the same sex. The participants, 16 male and 16 female undergraduate students at Boston University, had conversations on assigned topics with someone of the same sex, either a friend or a stranger, either in view of the other person or with a curtain between them. The conversations, 32 between women and 32 between men, were recorded and scored for the amount of female register each participant used. Of Lakoff’s WL features, the researchers focused on empty adjectives and tag-questions. They observed a significant difference ( $t = 1.96$ ,  $df = 62$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) between the mean number of instances of the female register: 5.16 in the conversations between women and 3.08 in the conversations between men.

The second study examined inquiries at an information booth in an urban municipal center. 107 men and 90 women spoke with the booth attendant, and a researcher coded the speech of the inquirer for instances of female register, including hedges, politeness, verb form (could you, would you), initial contact (person said “Hi” or “Excuse me”), and directness (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977, p. 317). The data showed that speech between a male information seeker and a male booth attendant contained less female register than the other conditions, but not to a statistically significant degree.

Their third study involved coding the speech of 3 police personnel in a suburban Connecticut police station and 90 clients (45 male, 45 female). Most of the coded conversations “involved requests for information or aid on the part of the client who came voluntarily to the station” (p. 318). The speech was coded for tag questions, hedges, and polite expressions. The results showed that women used WL more than men, and clients used WL more than police personnel (p. 321). The researchers determined that their data supported Lakoff’s hypothesis about what features are part of WL, but not necessarily her claim about this language reflecting women’s status in society (p. 320), especially given the effect of speaker role in Study 3.

However, not all studies have found evidence to support Lakoff’s claims. DuBois and Crouch (1975) conducted one of the earlier studies to emphatically contradict her theories, both on methodological and evidentiary grounds. The study criticized Lakoff’s method as “introspection *cum* asystematic, uncontrolled, and unverifiable observation,” (p. 289). “Language and Woman’s Place,” they argued, consisted of “errors of fact, use of examples which strike us as no more than fabricated, failure to isolate the variables in question, errors of reasoning, [and] disregard of the work of others” (p. 289), and they provide reasoning for each of these claims. One of Lakoff’s most egregious oversights was her disregard for the work of others, exemplified by her “failure to cite any work on English except one of her own” (p. 291). While “Language and Woman’s Place” did set the study of gendered language in motion, it was not the first modern scholarly work on the subject, which Lakoff fails to acknowledge.

Other research supports Lakoff’s claims about the features of women’s language but says this is not about gender, it is about power and powerlessness. O’Barr and

Atkins (1980) recorded over 150 hours of criminal court trials in North Carolina to study language variation in the courtroom, including variation between genders. Most of the lawyers were male, so there was not an equal enough gender distribution to examine gender-linked variation. But among witnesses, who were more equally distributed by gender, they found many women whose speech did exhibit Lakoff's WL features. However, they also found "considerable variation in the degree to which women exhibited these characteristics" (p. 97). They also found men who exhibited these characteristics, also to varying degrees. This indicated that WL was not characteristic of all women nor exclusive to only women. Upon examining factors beyond gender, they found that a witness' use of WL was inversely correlated with their social status. They found more women toward "the high end of the continuum," and the women who were at the low end all had "an unusually high social status...they were typically well-educated, professional women of middle-class background" (pp. 102-103). Correspondingly, the men who used more WL features "tended to be men who held either subordinate, lower-status jobs or were unemployed" (p. 103). Those who had previous courtroom experience, such as expert witnesses, also used less WL.

Their overall conclusion was that "so-called women's language is in large part a language of powerlessness, a condition that can apply to men as well as women. That a complex of such features should have been called 'women's language' in the first place reflects the general powerless position of many women in American society" (p. 94). They recognized that Lakoff was correct in attributing these features to the language women use, but did not attribute this to gender alone. They ascribe it to power, which women typically have less of in society. They suggest women's language instead be

called *powerless language*, a term that is more descriptive “of the social status of those who speak in this manner, and one which does not link it unnecessarily to the sex of a speaker” (p. 104). Whether these features should be defined as characteristic of the speech of powerless individuals generally, of women specifically, or of no one group at all, they have still entered the public consciousness as stereotypical features of women’s language.

More recent studies indicate that these same features remain in our beliefs about women’s speech. In one such study, Hancock, Stutts, and Bass (2015) examined actual language differences between men and women and “how well particular language measures can predict gender and femininity perceptions” (p. 318). For two experiments, researchers transcribed audio recordings of individual speakers and coded the transcripts for linguistic variables whose usage may be different between genders according to prior research. The two experiments differed in the topic speakers were talking about (personal injury or describing a painting) and in the gender of the speakers (only cisgender men and cisgender women, or cisgender men, cisgender women, and transgender women) (p. 319). In both experiments, 40 participants read these transcripts and judged the gender of each speaker, with choices “male” and “female,” and rated the femininity of the speakers, on a sliding scale with anchors “feminine” and “masculine” (p. 323).

The researchers found that participants’ judgment of speaker gender was at “chance levels in both experiments,” but “regression models for perception of gender and femininity were similar within each experiment” (p. 325). If a combination of certain variables were present, participants were more likely to judge the speaker as female

and rate them as more feminine. One of these variables was hedging, a feature that Lakoff identified as part of women's language nearly fifty years ago, suggesting that at least one of Lakoff's features still endures as a common stereotype of women's language.

However, unlike this study, most research is focused on determining actual language variation between genders, not perceived language variation. Perceived variation, or the stereotypes a society holds about language variation, is a part of "folklinguistics," which linguist Deborah Cameron (1985) defines as "that collection of beliefs about language which are accepted as common sense within a society" (p. 31). Folklinguistic beliefs have real consequences as they are "expressed in...etiquette books, grammars and even feminists writings," where "they have an effect on how women think they speak and how they think they ought to speak" (p. 155). Even if these stereotypes do not reflect a group's actual language use, they are interwoven with value judgments and can represent and reinforce social inequalities, since they tend to "fit rather well with the relative power and social prestige of the groups concerned" (p. 33).

Gender stereotypes support dominant ideologies when they are viewed as "prescriptions for behavior, then actual individuals have to respond to the stereotypical roles expected of them" (Talbot, 2003, p. 472). People not only think these gender stereotypes are accurate, they also expect women to conform to them; if they do not, they are deemed unladylike and judged harshly. Of course, women are also judged for exhibiting these stereotypes, since the features of women's language supposedly "present them as uncertain, weak, and empty-headed" (p. 474). As Cameron puts it, "it

seems women are damned (for incompetence) if they act the way women are meant to act, and equally damned (for unfemininity) if they do not” (Cameron 1994, p. 393).

Through identifying current stereotypes about language and gender, my project builds upon the work of Lakoff, Jespersen, Haas, and countless other academics by testing if their findings are still valid in the twenty-first century. Instead of relying on potentially outdated literature (literary or scholarly) to accurately identify the stereotypes recognized by wider society, I ask people what they think and believe, to determine which stereotypes are actually commonly recognized. Stereotypes, as products of social axioms, change as society changes, so it is necessary to periodically reexamine the schemata we used to describe the world in the past and revise, refine, or retire them altogether, based on how accurately they fit the world today.

## **Method**

### Design

My study used a mixed-methods design, following di Gennaro (2016). Participants took an online survey through Qualtrics. The first section of the survey contained only multiple-choice questions, to gather quantitative data, and the second section contained short-answer questions for participants to explain their answers in the previous section, to provide supplementary qualitative data. This design allowed for both a straightforward evaluation of what speech participants believed was produced by a woman, as well as insight into their reasoning, to see if they consciously identified the study’s target stereotypes.

## Participants

To gather participants, I posted the survey link in several Facebook groups I am a part of. This includes the group for my national sorority, a group for Americans living in Italy, my high school alumni group, a group for members of Mensa, and several groups for exchanging academic research surveys. I also shared the link to my personal Facebook page and asked several of my friends to share it to theirs as well. Due to the sizes of these groups, the sum total number of people who could've potentially seen the post was at least 50,000, though the actual number who saw it was certainly lower. In the posts, I explained that I needed participants to take a survey for my research on gendered language.

The survey was open from February 4 through March 5, 2020. When the survey was closed, there were 602 responses. However, though already confirming on the consent form that they were 18 years of age or older, two of the participants had responded that they were under 18 when entering their demographic information. These participants' responses were discarded, and the other 600 participants' responses were used for analysis.

Participant age ranged from 18 to 77, with a mean of 41.47 and a standard deviation of 16.88. Nearly one-third of all participants were between the ages of 18-29. 171 participants were university students. There were 370 female participants, 215 male, 6 other (e.g., fluid, nonbinary), and 9 who did not write their gender. 512 participants selected English as their first language. 334 participants said their political views were more liberal, 131 participants said their political views were more conservative, and 126 said neither.

## Survey

The survey consisted of three parts. In the first part, participants were instructed to read six short dialogues. Each dialogue contained a sentence of context which included the names of the two speakers; one name was traditionally male and the other traditionally female. The two lines of dialogue were presented without the speaker names, labeled as A and B instead. Participants were asked to select, in multiple choice form, which dialogue speaker, A or B, had the traditionally female name.

One of the lines in each dialogue contained a feature of women's language.

These features were:

1. Precise color word
2. Trivialized exclamations
3. Superpolite address
4. Tag question
5. Apology
6. Verbosity

Lakoff identified the first four features as characteristics of women's language, and the last two are commonly identified as women's language in other prominent literature. As an example of the format of the dialogue and what the participants were asked, here is the first dialogue:

### Dialogue 1

*Context: Jim and Sarah are deciding on paint colors at a home supplies store.*

A: What about this lavender?

B: You mean that light purple?

Which speaker is Sarah?

- A
- B

Part 2 of the survey included the same six dialogues. For each dialogue, participants were reminded of their answer in the previous section, then asked why they made that choice. The response form was short answer, so there was no limit to how much the participants could write. This is how the dialogues were presented in Part 2:

Dialogue 1

*Context: Jim and Sarah are deciding on paint colors at a home supplies store.*

A: What about this lavender?

B: You mean that light purple?

For this dialogue, you said Sarah is speaker A. Why?

If the participant had instead said Sarah was Speaker B, the question reflected that. If the participant hadn't answered for that dialogue in Part 1, they were asked why they didn't identify Sarah as either speaker. This was repeated for each dialogue. All six dialogues followed this same pattern in both Part 1 and Part 2. The dialogues are included in the Results section and the full survey can be found in the Appendix.

Part 3 of the survey asked for the participant's demographic information, including age, gender, first language, student status, and political views. The format of these questions can be found in the Appendix.

## Data Analysis Approach and Limitations

Analysis of quantitative data was straightforward since it required only looking at the number of participants who identified the speaker using women's language with the female name. Analyzing the qualitative data was more involved, due to both the sheer volume of data and the nature of qualitative data analysis. For each of the six dialogues, I had approximately 600 written responses. To analyze these responses, I defined categories, e.g., *target stereotype*, *other gender stereotype*, and *personal experience*, and if a response mentioned or fit into one of those categories then it was coded as such. Because of the size of my data set, I had to choose between double-coding a subset of the data (i.e., re-reading and re-coding a smaller selection of the responses more than once) or coding all the data once, and, I decided on the latter, mostly because I was personally curious about the variety of responses.

Ideally, I would have written more than one dialogue for each target stereotype to mitigate any confounding effects of the dialogue contents, to see if participants are identifying speakers because of the target stereotypes specifically, but that simply wasn't feasible within the time I had. Because of this, my results have limited reliability, and the strongest conclusions I could draw from the quantitative data were correlative, not causative. However, the abundance of qualitative data helps mitigate this, since participants can state if they recognized the target stereotypes and the reasoning behind their choices.

## Results

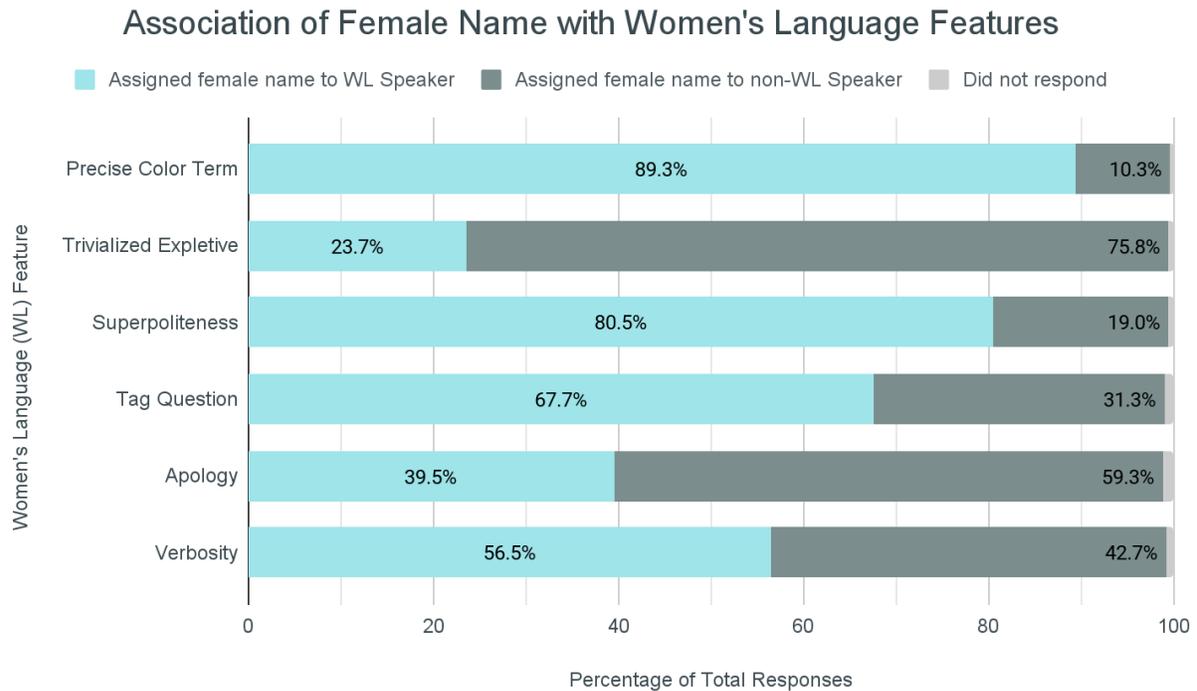
I've separated the results first by linguistic feature, then by survey part. Part 1 of the survey collected quantitative data and Part 2 collected qualitative data. For the quantitative data, I've included the raw counts as well as the percentage of the total for each dialogue. For the qualitative data, I've identified general but clear trends that the coding revealed, as well as some analysis of the data. Because I only coded the responses once, there may be minor inaccuracy in the exact counts. Enough responses matched these trends that a small increase or decrease in exact counts due to coding error would not affect the presence of these trends; they would still be clearly observable. For this reason, I refrain from precisely quantifying the number of responses exhibiting each characteristic or trend.

In every dialogue, some responses cited the name order given in the dialogue context, e.g., "Jim and Sarah" or "Ron and Lily," to assign the first name to Speaker A and the second to Speaker B, regardless of the actual content of the dialogues. However, the number of these responses was proportionally very small at approximately 20 per dialogue, which is only 0.33% of total responses. Three of the dialogue contexts had the female name first and the other three had the male name first; there was no correlation between this order and participant response. All typical response examples in this section are taken verbatim from participant responses, other than several small corrections made for obvious spelling errors.

This graph presents a summary, in percentage form, of Part 1 responses to each dialogue for all 600 participants. "Assigned female name to WL Speaker" means these participants assigned the female name to the dialogue speaker using the target WL

feature. “Assigned female name to non-WL speaker” means these participants assigned the female name to the other dialogue speaker.

*Graph: Summary of Quantitative Data*



Participants associated the female name with the WL linguistic features most strongly for precise color term, superpoliteness, tag question, and verbosity. Participants associated the female name with the non-WL dialogue speakers for trivialized expletive and apology.

### **Precise Color Term**

Dialogue

*Context: Jim and Sarah are deciding on paint colors at a home supplies store.*

A: What about this lavender?

B: You mean that light purple?

## Part 1

*Table 1: Precise Color Term Dialogue Responses*

Response	Count	Percent
<b>Speaker A</b>	536	89.3%
<b>Speaker B</b>	62	10.3%

For this dialogue, 536 participants (89.3%) said that Sarah was Speaker A, i.e., that Speaker A was the woman; 62 participants (10.3%) said that Sarah was Speaker B, i.e., that Speaker B was the woman; and 2 participants (0.3%) did not respond.

## Part 2

Responses for this dialogue overwhelmingly confirm that use of precise color terms is a stereotypical feature of WL. Approximately 80% of all written responses mentioned color in some way. Some examples of typical responses were:

- guys don't use the word lavender
- Women are more specific about colors/shades.
- Specific terms of color are feminine

However, interestingly, participants gave different reasons for this. Lakoff (1973) ascribes this to women's place in society, as she ascribes all the features she identifies, which is a central tenet of her article. She writes that "fine discrimination of color is relevant for women, but not for men" because "men tend to relegate to women things that are not of concern to them, or do not involve their egos" (p. 49). Rephrased, she writes, that women are "relegated the non-crucial decisions," such as naming colors, because they "are not expected to make decisions on important matters" (p. 49). Women's language, she claims, is a result of social inequity.

In my study, most participants ascribed one of three reasons for precise color terms being characteristic of WL, but social inequity was not one of them. These three reasons, along with examples of typical responses, were:

1. Women biologically see more colors
  - Women tend to see more shades of colors and know more specific shade names for those colors.
  - Women see more color variances and have more words to describe them
2. Men and women see the same colors but only women know the precise names
  - Women usually know specific colors more than men
  - A guy wouldn't know what color lavender is
3. Men and women both see the same colors and know the precise names, but men are unwilling to or discouraged from using them
  - Stereotype of men pretending not to know subtle colors
  - Some men are reluctant to use specific terms relating to color, texture, etc.

A number of participants claimed that women use more precise color terms not because something about color is inherently feminine, but because of the more general stereotype that women are more detail-oriented and precise than men.

- Girls usually have more attention to detail so they would know the difference between purple and lavender.
- woman are more descriptive
- Lavender is a more specific color, and I believe women are more detail oriented.
- I've found women to be more precise with language.

## Trivialized Expletive

### Dialogue

*Context: Jenny and Mark are talking before class.*

A: How long did it take you to do last night's homework?

B: Oh shoot, I completely forgot about the homework!

### Part 1

*Table 2: Trivialized Expletive Dialogue Responses*

Response	Count	Percent
<b>Speaker A</b>	455	75.8%
<b>Speaker B</b>	142	23.7%

For this dialogue, 455 participants (75.8%) said that Speaker A was Jenny, i.e., that Speaker A was the woman; 142 participants (23.7%) said that Speaker B was Jenny, i.e., that Speaker B was the woman; and 3 participants (0.5%) did not respond.

### Part 2

For this dialogue, most participants identified Speaker A as the woman, though Speaker B used the trivialized expletive. The written responses revealed that the main reason for this was not any specific linguistic feature used but was instead about a group of connected non-language stereotypes. Participants focused more on gender stereotypes about school, work ethic, responsibility, and organization, saying that women care more about or work harder toward these things. Participants focused more on who did the homework and who forgot, instead of the language features used to convey this information. Of the participants who identified Speaker A as the woman, nearly 70% of them mentioned this reasoning. Some typical responses were:

- Well organized
- School is more geared to females' ability to pay attention.
- In my experience, females are more prepared in terms of homework.
- Male more likely to have forgotten homework
- Based on the stereotype that women are conscientious and do their work
- Women are more responsible

Some participants chose Speaker A as the woman because they determined that the speaker's purpose was to open a conversation, instead of seeking and being interested in a specific piece of information (the length of time Speaker B spent on the homework). Examples include:

- Women tend to ask questions to engage others.
- Asking questions, showing curiosity about another.
- She initiates a conversation with an open question.

While most participants selected Speaker A as the woman, many of the participants who selected Speaker B did identify the target stereotype of the trivialized expletive:

- The response "Oh shoot" sounds more feminine.
- "Shoot" sounds like a girl's word.
- she said "shoot" instead of something stronger
- I think a male would be more likely to say "shit" instead of "shoot".

### **Superpoliteness**

Dialogue

*Context: Ron and Lily are watching a movie together.*

A: I'm going to grab a soda from the fridge. Want anything?

B: Oh, no thanks—but if you wouldn't mind, could you please bring back some napkins?

## Part 1

*Table 3: Superpoliteness Dialogue Responses*

Response	Count	Percent
Speaker A	114	19.0%
Speaker B	483	80.5%

For this dialogue, 114 participants (19%) said that Speaker A was Lily, i.e., that Speaker A was the woman; 483 participants (80.5%) said that Speaker B was Lily, i.e., that Speaker B was the woman; and 3 participants (0.5%) did not respond.

## Part 2

Of the participants who selected Speaker B as the woman, about 30% of them identified the target stereotype of superpoliteness, with typical responses including:

- Polite expressions such as could you, if you wouldn't mind.
- A lot of words are used-- almost too polite.
- Men are not likely to use "if you wouldn't mind" phrase.
- Politeness

About 50% of participants who selected Speaker B focused on the item Speaker B was asking for, a napkin, instead of just the linguistic features. Participants cited women's preference for cleanliness or men's indifference to it.

- Women are more likely to want a napkin

- Women are more concerned about cleanliness and tidying up.
- Men typically do not use napkins
- most men don't ask for napkins when a sleeve will work.

For those who said A, they said it was because women will offer to do things for others.

- She's offering to take care of the male
- offered to get something for the other person
- Because she was thoughtful enough to ask if the other person in the room wanted something while she was up.
- Awareness of others' needs

### Tag Question

Dialogue

*Context: Laura and Brian are discussing their morning commute.*

A: Traffic today was terrible, wasn't it?

B: It took me 45 minutes to drive 4 blocks!

Part 1

*Table 4: Tag Question Dialogue Responses*

Response	Count	Percent
Speaker A	406	67.7%
Speaker B	188	31.3%

For this dialogue, 406 participants (67.7%) said that Speaker A was Laura, i.e., that Speaker A was the woman; 188 participants (31.3%) said that Speaker B was Laura, i.e., that Speaker B was the woman; and 6 participants (1%) did not respond.

## Part 2

Most participants identified the speaker using the target stereotype, the tag question, as the woman. However, only about 10% of the responses from these participants specifically cited the tag question as their reason. Use of tags to seek agreement is more likely to be female speech.

- The question at the end of A for confirmation.
- Not sure why. Maybe As a guy I'd rarely say "wasn't it", so I think it's more feminine.
- Usually a male wouldn't say "wasn't it"

Many of these same responses, as well as some that didn't specifically cite the tag question, said that their reason was because women are better conversationalists, or that they initiate small talk more, which is what they interpreted Speaker A's purpose to be. Examples of this were:

- She was opening conversation with a mention of traffic.
- She was trying to make small talk.
- She invited sharing. Women tend to do that more than men.
- I imagine the male Speaker Being more frustrated in this conversation and not giving the other Speaker A conversation hook to respond to.
- Women tend to seek out connection with people through finding common ground.

This is notable because mainstream advice to women often suggests that tag questions make women sound unsure of themselves, like they need someone to confirm what they think. However, looking at these written responses, people may not

see tag questions as indications of uncertainty at all. Many respondents saw tag questions as ways of starting a conversation or inviting the other person to share their thoughts, not as literal questions asking for the other person's corroboration or agreement with the woman's experience.

About 40% of these responses mentioned other gender stereotypes, including ones that I hadn't encountered before, like that men are more numbers-oriented than women:

- I think a man is more likely to give number details
- Men are usually more detailed with time and distance estimates.
- Girls usually aren't specific about time and distance.
- Women tend to describe situations in a more general sense, whereas men tend to measure scenarios in a quantifiable manner such as time or distance.

For those who identified Speaker B as the woman, one of the main reasons in their responses was the speaker's emotional language, indicated by the exclamation mark. Many also stated that women give more detail than men, so a woman would give a specific explanation or evidence to support their statement, e.g., "45 minutes," where a man will say something more general, e.g., "terrible".

- More specific/detailed response.
- Women are more descriptive.
- I feel she would be more expressive and emotional over the traffic
- Honestly, this one was tough and I used the exclamation point as an indicator that the phrase was more emotionally charged.

About 30% of responses to this dialogue were coded as “unsure,” meaning the participant stated they didn’t know why they originally chose that speaker, or they could guess the reason but weren’t sure about it. This is the most “unsure” responses of all 6 dialogues.

## Apology

### Dialogue

*Context: Michael and Beth are in a business meeting.*

A: Sorry, I didn’t understand your last slide.

B: Okay, I’ll go over it again.

### Part 1

*Table 5: Apology Dialogue Responses*

Response	Count	Percent
Speaker A	237	39.5%
Speaker B	356	59.3%

For this dialogue, 237 participants (39.5%) said that Speaker A was Beth, i.e., that Speaker A was the woman; 356 participants (59.3%) said that Speaker B was Beth, i.e., that Speaker B was the woman; and 7 participants (1.2%) did not respond.

### Part 2

For this dialogue, most participants identified Speaker B to be the woman. Many of these participants said that women are more willing to explain things to others, to help them understand, as an extension of their traditional role as nurturers. Some examples include:

- Girls are stereotypically kinder and more compassionate so Beth would perhaps be more likely to go over the slide whereas Michael may have just moved on with the meeting
- The response includes an offer to review the slide, which I believed was a more likely female response. I felt that a more typical male response would have been to question Speaker A's inability to grasp the concept presented.
- She's willing to take the time to go over it, which is a nurturing trait I generally associate with females

For the participants who identified Speaker A as the woman, about 25% explicitly identified the speaker's use of apology:

- Women are more polite therefore using the term Sorry.
- Because she said "sorry" about not understanding it and i feel like women tend to be more polite when making a request.
- Women apologize when not necessary
- Women tend to over-apologize. She started by saying sorry.
- The speaker started the sentence with "Sorry". I don't think a male would apologize before saying they didn't understand something

While some of these responses suggested that women's apologies are often unnecessary, as indicators of subservience or hesitancy, many instead identified the apologies as a way to be polite. Just as people may see tag questions as conversation starters instead of indicators of uncertainty, they may see apologies as politeness markers instead of acknowledgements of wrongdoing.

Another reason many participants selected Speaker A as the woman was the stereotype that men are often unwilling to admit that they don't understand something and are unwilling to ask others for help, (like not asking for directions).

- Women are more likely to acknowledge they don't understand something and ask for an explanation. Men are more likely to pretend to understand for fear of looking dumb.
- Women tend to ask questions when they don't understand something.
- Men are not often willing to admit that they need further explanation.
- Men are less likely to admit so openly that they don't understand something.
- Women will ask for clarification or admit not understanding while men tend to be too proud to ask.

## Verbosity

### Dialogue

*Context: Maria and Ben are discussing the movie they just saw together.*

A: Great movie.

B: Yeah, I think so too. I thought the action scenes were cool, but that last scene was kind of confusing. I hope they make a sequel.

### Part 1

*Table 6: Verbosity Dialogue Responses*

Response	Count	Percent
<b>Speaker A</b>	256	42.7%
<b>Speaker B</b>	339	56.5%

For this dialogue, 256 participants (42.7%) said that Speaker A was Maria, i.e., that Speaker A was the woman; 339 participants (56.5%) said that Speaker B was Maria, i.e., that Speaker B was the woman; and 5 participants (0.8%) did not respond.

## Part 2

The stereotype of women's verbosity is clearly present in the responses for this dialogue. About 50% of the participants who selected Speaker B as the woman mentioned that women talk more than men. Typical responses were:

- The lengthy response felt more likely to be a feminine speaker
- Just seemed wordy for a guy
- Women talk more. Men use fewer words.
- There is a stereotype that men are shorter with their responses.

Many participants said specifically that women go into more detail or more depth than men do, instead of just saying women talk more. Examples of this were:

- Women often go into more detail when talking
- Women tend to be more detailed and explain how they feel, whereas guys keep it short and sweet
- Women are more likely to go into more depth
- More detail about the movie

For participants who identified Speaker A as the woman, much of the reasoning was about the genre of movie, or at least of the scene Speaker B mentioned.

Stereotypically, men prefer action movies more than women do, so they determined Speaker B was the man.

- Men are more likely to like action scenes

- Men are stereotypically fond of action movies.
- "The action scenes were cool" sounded like a stereotypical male sentiment to me.
- Action movies seem more masculine to me

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Overall, the results indicate that stereotypes about women's language today are largely similar to those in 1973, when Lakoff published "Language and Women's Place." Lakoff believed that women may be taken less seriously due to their use of WL features, like tag questions and apologies. Modern advice to women follows suit, typically telling women to avoid tag questions so they don't sound unsure of themselves, or to stop apologizing so much because it implies they are guilty of something. However, the responses to my survey suggest a view of WL that contradicts the mainstream one. While the stereotypical WL features are largely the same, the perceived effect of using them is not.

The qualitative data suggested that stereotypes about women's language are woven into non-language stereotypes, and they reinforce each other. Accordingly, the identification of specific language features as women's language is largely contextual, involving language and non-language stereotypes in equal measure. This is shown in responses to the precise color term dialogue and the verbosity dialogue. For both, many participants mentioned that women care more about details; this is not a language stereotype itself, but it is connected to language stereotypes. The language stereotypes can be seen as evidence to support overarching non-language stereotypes.

When stereotypes seem to clash, one may take precedence over the other. For example, with the trivialized expletive dialogue, only 24% of participants said that the speaker using the trivialized expletive was the woman. This is because they focused on a non-language stereotype, that girls are more likely to do their homework, and this took precedence over the language feature.

Interestingly, when participants did identify the target stereotypes, or, for that matter, any other stereotype about women, they often used these traits to frame women in a positive light (or men in a negative one). The features of WL were not seen as causes or evidence of women's social inequity or inferiority—on the contrary, they were often framed as evidence of either women's superiority or men's deficiency. Here are different ways of framing some of the linguistic stereotypes mentioned in the responses as negative traits of women or negative traits of men:

Women use more precise color terms because they're frivolous.	Men use fewer precise color terms because they're unobservant.
Women use more tag questions because they're insecure.	Men use fewer tag questions because they're poor conversationalists.
Women apologize more because they're meek.	Men apologize less because they're rude.
Women use more words because they're pedantic.	Men use fewer words because they're imprecise.

I noticed more responses similar to the second column than the first. Perhaps the traits we assign to women and women's language haven't changed much in the last 50 years, but our value judgments about them have. Lakoff saw these features as negative, indicative of woman's place in the world. Today, the stereotypes themselves

may be the same but woman's place isn't. Perhaps that is why the value judgments we associate with the stereotypes and the reasons we use to justify them have changed for the positive. It's time to reevaluate "Language and Woman's Place" because whether or not language has changed, what we think of woman's place certainly has.

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## Appendix

Full Survey

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### Gender-Based Linguistic Stereotypes

#### Start of Part 1

Please read the 6 short dialogues below and respond to the question for each.

---

Page Break

#### **Dialogue 1**

*Context: Jim and Sarah are deciding on paint colors at a home supplies store.*

A: What about this lavender?

B: You mean that light purple?

Which speaker is Sarah?

- A
  - B
- 

#### **Dialogue 2**

*Context: Jenny and Mark are talking before class.*

A: How long did it take you to do last night's homework?

B: Oh shoot, I completely forgot about the homework!

Which speaker is Jenny?

- A
  - B
- 

#### **Dialogue 3**

*Context: Ron and Lily are watching a movie together.*

A: I'm going to grab a soda from the fridge. Want anything?

B: Oh, no thanks--but if you wouldn't mind, could you please bring back some napkins?

Which speaker is Lily?

- A
  - B
- 

#### **Dialogue 4**

*Context: Laura and Brian are discussing their morning commute.*

A: Traffic today was terrible, wasn't it?

B: It took me 45 minutes to drive 4 blocks!

Which speaker is Laura?

- A
  - B
- 

#### **Dialogue 5**

*Context: Michael and Beth are in a business meeting.*

A: Sorry, I didn't understand your last slide.

B: Okay, I'll go over it again.

Which speaker is Beth?

- A
  - B
- 

#### **Dialogue 6**

*Context: Maria and Ben are discussing the movie they just saw together.*

A: Great movie.

B: Yeah, I think so too. I thought the action scenes were cool, but that last scene was kind of confusing. I hope they make a sequel.

Which speaker is Maria?

- A
- B

End of Part 1

---

## Start of Part 2

The same 6 dialogues are repeated on the next page. Please respond to the brief follow-up question for each.

---

Page Break

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 1 = A*

### **Dialogue 1**

*Context: Jim and Sarah are deciding on paint colors at a home supplies store.*

A: What about this lavender?

B: You mean that light purple?

For this dialogue, you said Sarah is speaker A. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 1 = B*

### **Dialogue 1**

*Context: Jim and Sarah are deciding on paint colors at a home supplies store.*

A: What about this lavender?

B: You mean that light purple?

For this dialogue, you said Sarah is speaker B. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 1 != A*

*And Dialogue 1 != B*

### **Dialogue 1**

*Context: Jim and Sarah are deciding on paint colors at a home supplies store.*

A: What about this lavender?

B: You mean that light purple?

For this dialogue, you didn't identify Sarah as either speaker. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 2 = A*

**Dialogue 2**

*Context: Jenny and Mark are talking before class.*

A: How long did it take you to do last night's homework?

B: Oh shoot, I completely forgot about the homework!

For this dialogue, you said Jenny is speaker A. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 2 = B*

**Dialogue 2**

*Context: Jenny and Mark are talking before class.*

A: How long did it take you to do last night's homework?

B: Oh shoot, I completely forgot about the homework!

For this dialogue, you said Jenny is speaker B. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 2 != A*

*And Dialogue 2 != B*

**Dialogue 2**

*Context: Jenny and Mark are talking before class.*

A: How long did it take you to do last night's homework?

B: Oh shoot, I completely forgot about the homework!

For this dialogue, you didn't identify Jenny as either speaker. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 3 = A*

**Dialogue 3**

*Context: Ron and Lily are watching a movie together.*

A: I'm going to grab a soda from the fridge. Want anything?

B: Oh, no thanks--but if you wouldn't mind, could you please bring back some napkins?

For this dialogue, you said Lily is speaker A. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 3 = B*

### **Dialogue 3**

*Context: Ron and Lily are watching a movie together.*

A: I'm going to grab a soda from the fridge. Want anything?

B: Oh, no thanks--but if you wouldn't mind, could you please bring back some napkins?

For this dialogue, you said Lily is speaker B. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 3 != A*

*And Dialogue 3 != B*

### **Dialogue 3**

*Context: Ron and Lily are watching a movie together.*

A: I'm going to grab a soda from the fridge. Want anything?

B: Oh, no thanks--but if you wouldn't mind, could you please bring back some napkins?

For this dialogue, you didn't identify Lily as either speaker. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 4 = A*

### **Dialogue 4**

*Context: Laura and Brian are discussing their morning commute.*

A: Traffic today was terrible, wasn't it?

B: It took me 45 minutes to drive 4 blocks!

For this dialogue, you said Laura is speaker A. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 4 = B*

### **Dialogue 4**

*Context: Laura and Brian are discussing their morning commute.*

A: Traffic today was terrible, wasn't it?

B: It took me 45 minutes to drive 4 blocks!

For this dialogue, you said Laura is speaker B. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 4 != A*

*And Dialogue 4 != B*

#### **Dialogue 4**

*Context: Laura and Brian are discussing their morning commute.*

A: Traffic today was terrible, wasn't it?

B: It took me 45 minutes to drive 4 blocks!

For this dialogue, you didn't identify Laura as either speaker. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 5 = A*

#### **Dialogue 5**

*Context: Michael and Beth are in a business meeting.*

A: Sorry, I didn't understand your last slide.

B: Okay, I'll go over it again.

For this dialogue, you said Beth is speaker A. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 5 = B*

#### **Dialogue 5**

*Context: Michael and Beth are in a business meeting.*

A: Sorry, I didn't understand your last slide.

B: Okay, I'll go over it again.

For this dialogue, you said Beth is speaker B. Why?

---

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 5 != A*

*And Dialogue 5 != B*

#### **Dialogue 5**

*Context: Michael and Beth are in a business meeting.*

A: Sorry, I didn't understand your last slide.

B: Okay, I'll go over it again.

For this dialogue, you didn't identify Beth as either speaker. Why?

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 6 = A*

### **Dialogue 6**

*Context: Maria and Ben are discussing the movie they just saw together.*

A: Great movie.

B: Yeah, I think so too. I thought the action scenes were cool, but that last scene was kind of confusing. I hope they make a sequel.

For this dialogue, you said Maria is speaker A. Why?

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 6 = B*

### **Dialogue 6**

*Context: Maria and Ben are discussing the movie they just saw together.*

A: Great movie.

B: Yeah, I think so too. I thought the action scenes were cool, but that last scene was kind of confusing. I hope they make a sequel.

For this dialogue, you said Maria is speaker B. Why?

*Display This Question:*

*If Dialogue 6 != A*

*And Dialogue 6 != B*

### **Dialogue 6**

*Context: Maria and Ben are discussing the movie they just saw together.*

A: Great movie.

B: Yeah, I think so too. I thought the action scenes were cool, but that last scene was kind of confusing. I hope they make a sequel.

For this dialogue, you didn't identify Maria as either speaker. Why?

## End of Part 2

---

### Start of Demographic Information

**Please provide the following information about yourself.**

---

Age

---

Gender

---

Is English your first language? If it is not, please include your first language in the text box.

- Yes, English is my first language.
  - No, English is not my first language.
- 

Are you currently a university student?

- Yes
  - No
- 

Do you consider your political views to be more conservative or more liberal?

- Conservative
- Liberal
- Neither

### End of Demographic Information

---