



Linguistics

# Women Language Features in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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## A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to observe the types of women language features and the most frequent women language feature used by the main women characters in the dialogue of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* play. Ten women language features proposed by Robin Lakoff is used to analyze the data. This study only observes eight out of ten women language features proposed by Robin Lakoff, namely tag question, intensifier, hypercorrect grammar, hedges or fillers, empty adjectives, precise color terms, super polite form, and avoidance of strong swear words. This study excludes emphatic stress and rising intonation on declaratives feature. Due to the absence of any numeric data, this study uses descriptive qualitative approach. The data is taken from written script of the play which consists of eleven scenes. Seven women language features found namely lexical hedges or fillers, tag question, intensifier, empty adjectives, superpolite form, avoidance of strong swear words, and precise color terms. The most frequent feature is lexical hedges or fillers (59.49%) while no hypercorrect grammar is found. This study supports Lakoff theory since most of the features are found in the conversation of main women characters.

## I. INTRODUCTION

We are surrounded by gender stereotypes throughout our life since childhood. Men and women are set apart in physiological and psychological ways. Men and women may practice different language style although they are from the same speech community. The differences in men and women language use appeared to be research interests for decades. Various studies observed men and women speech. Many believe that men and women speech are different in their form, topic, content, and use. Lakoff believe that women language style reflects and contributes to the oppressed role of women in patriarchal world. An example that reflect this is tag questions at the end of a statement. Tag questions offering the speaker a way to make an assertion without committing herself to its truthfulness. Tags questions allow the listener to disagree without attacking the speaker directly, as the speaker does not appear to be completely convinced of the

statement anyway (Lakoff, 1973:54). All forms of media can embodied women speech in spoken or written manner. Movie, soap opera and play might be the spoken form of women speech while the written form can be seen in books, novels, etc. In all forms of media that reflects women speech, a play, however, appears to reflect authentic language use and constructed of perception and assumption about women's speech patterns. A play dialogues can be used to illustrate the assumptions about gendered language use. One of plays that exposing women's language features is *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a play which was written in 1947 by American playwright Tennessee Williams who received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and New York Drama Critics' Circle Best Play a year after the play premiered.

Tennessee Williams is an American controversial playwright for producing some of the most fascinating works for American theatre. People

already aware of his troubled private life. Tennessee Williams released his masterpiece play called *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and established a new standards for American drama as well. Many praises and awards are received since the play had been released. The play itself and its Broadway performances were a huge success. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the second success on Broadway after Tennessee William's triumph with *The Glass Menagerie*. *A Streetcar Named Desire* was strongly influenced by Williams' own biographical background like several of his other plays. He never deny that his own history and life reflects his works and even compare his own life and the characters in his own work like *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *A Streetcar Named Desire* has not lost its fame until today. Two of the characters, Blanche and Stella DuBois, are drawing people's attention and worth to be examined more thoroughly.

Several previous studies carried out by scholars raising issue on women language features. Most of these previous studies were supporting Lakoff idea on women language features. Earlier, Mulyaningtyas (2004) in *A Study of Women Linguistic Features Found in The Dialogue of Gilmore Girls TV Series* shows that nine out of ten features are exist. Rosita (2008) observed women language features of the main female characters in *Sex and The City* movie. Her study entitled *Women Language Features used in Sex and The City* found nine out of ten women language features occurred in the dialogue. The only feature that was not found is hypercorrect grammar. Lambertz (2011) studied the representation of women language in German and Australian soap operas. His study entitled *Women's Language in Soap Opera: Comparing Features of Female Speech in Australia and Germany* concerned about tentativeness in women language and the influence of media role models on reproducing gender stereotypes. He found out that women language features can be identified in German and Australian cultural context.

Savitri (2012) found nine out of ten features in her study entitled *An Analysis of Women Language Features in Legally Blonde I*. Nine women language features except precise color terms are occurred in the dialogue. The finding of her study supports Lakoff theory of women language features since most of women characters uses it.

Meanwhile, Pebrianti (2013) in her study entitled *Women Language Features Used by Indonesian Female Bloggers* observed women language features, the frequency of each features, and the possible reasons of usage. The study implemented nine women language features and excluding rising intonation on declaratives. It shows that eight out of nine were used by female bloggers. While the possible reasons of usage according to respondents shows that they tend to reflect hesitation and lack of confidence during conversation. In addition, some of respondents stated that women have higher level of vocabularies than men.

Kartika (2015) found six women language features occurred in the same-sex communication and six women language features in cross-sex communication. Her study which entitled *Women Linguistic Features Used by Oprah Winfrey in Same-Sex and Cross-Sex Communication* added the list of studies that support Lakoff theory of women language features. There were many studies regarding Lakoff women language features with various source of data. Mulyaningtyas (2004) examined dialogue in TV series while Rosita (2008) and Savitri (2012) used movies as their source of data. Lambertz (2011) observed soap operas, Pebrianti (2013) used female blogger's posts, and Kartika (2015) used talk show dialogue as the source of data. The previous studies were commonly discussing women language features in context of movie, soap opera or talk show. There were no investigation about women language features in literary works such as a play before.

Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (2003) suggest that gender is embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, our action, our beliefs, and our desires. Possible differences in men and women linguistic styles has been identified and interpreted by many scholars for decades. Many believe that there are regular differences exist between men and women speech. It is impossible to live without gender-oriented way and not to bring out gendered behavior in many aspects while the gender categories still exist in our society.

An American feminist and linguist Robin Lakoff in her book called *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) states that women were trained to sound inferior, tend to soften and weaken their expression of opinion through some features. Society expects women to use more polite form and correct grammar

in order to appear more feminine. As they lack of social status, Lakoff also believe that women use super polite forms and hypercorrect grammar more regularly in their conversation in order to acquire their social status with polite and indirect request.

In her book titled *Language and Women's Place*, Robin Lakoff (1975) presented a list of ten women language features. Numerous researchers who study language use among men and women have inspired and cited her work from time to time. Women language features are some features that clearly reflect the characteristics of women's language and demonstrate variations between men and women in their language use. Lakoff (1975) believes that women tend to express their opinion through following features;

Robin Lakoff (1975) provided list of ten women language features in her book entitled *Language and Women's Place*. Her work has been influenced and cited by many scholars who study language usage between men and women. Women linguistic features are several features that specifically indicate the characteristics of women language and show difference of language usage between men and women. An American feminist and linguist Robin Lakoff (1975) says that women were being trained to sound inferior. Lakoff suggests that women tend to soften and weaken their expression of opinion through following features;

- Tag question e.g *she is nice, isn't she?*. It is used when the speaker stating a claim but less confidence in the truth of the claim.
- Intensifier e.g *I like him so much, I'm so glad you're here*. Intensifier frequently used to strengthen an assertion.
- Hypercorrect grammar, e.g consistent use of standard word form.
- Hedges or fillers e.g *you know, sort of, well, kinda, probably, I mean, mmm..etc*. Hedging is the way to express lack of confidence while fillers are to signal pause even when someone hasn't finished speaking.
- Rising intonation on declaratives e.g *it's really good?*. It is a high intonation used by women in declarative form.
- Empty adjectives e.g *divine, charming, cute, fabulous*. Empty adjectives are adjectives that convey only an emotional reaction rather than specific information.
- Super polite form e.g indirect requests. Women are linguistically more polite than men so they will use more 'superpolite' forms.
- Emphatic stress e.g It was a *brilliant* performance. It is used to emphasize the utterance or strengthen the meaning of an utterance.
- Avoidance of strong swear words e.g *fudge, my goodness, piffle, gosh, heck, etc*.
- Precise color terms, e.g. *violet, magenta, aquamarine, ivory, beige, fuschia, etc*. It is used to mention color specifically.

## II. METHOD

This study is intended at discovering the type of women language features and the most frequent features used by main female characters, Blanche and Stella, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In order to answer the statement of the problems earlier, the writer used descriptive qualitative approach in conducting the study. This section describe the detail steps taken by the writer to obtain the data or how the study was conducted. Readers will be able to evaluate the appropriateness of the research methodology through a complete description of the methods. This study conducted using descriptive qualitative methodology in order to produce deeper and more comprehensive information. In order to support the result in revealing amounts of women language features used by the female characters, this study will also add number or statistics. The statistics will be shown in form of percentage.

The written script of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the source for writer to collect and analyze Lakoff women language features. First of all, the writer obtained the written script of *A Streetcar Named Desire* play by searching and retrieving online from <http://jhampton.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/53101025/Streetcar.pdf>. The next step is to read the whole script carefully scene by scene. The writer then will sorts the utterances spoken only by the main female characters, Blanche and Stella. After that, the writer identified the women language features in their each utterances based on Robin Lakoff theory. After getting the list of features, the writer classified the women language features found and counted the frequency of emergence of each features. Finally, the writer interpreted the findings and made a conclusion based on the interpretation.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lakoff (1975) presented a list of ten women language features in her book entitled *Language and Women's Place* which are lexical hedges or filler, tag question, hypercorrect grammar, intensifier, empty adjectives, avoidance of strong swear words, precise color terms, superpolite forms, emphatic stress and rising intonation on declaratives. Lakoff assumed that women have different language style. Women tend to use features which reflect the uncertainty and insecurity in their speech. Women has lower social status and less powerful than men in society. This study only applied eight out of the ten features since the source of the data is in the form of written orthographical script. Rising intonation on declaratives and emphatic stress are excluded in the analysis. Based on the analysis, there are seven out of eight features found in the conversation of Blanche and Stella in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* play. Hypercorrect grammar is absent during the conversation. The following table shows the women language features found in the play. Furthermore, the measurement of frequency of each feature can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Frequency of Women Language Features used by Blanche and Stella in A Streetcar Named Desire**

Women Language Features	Frequency	Percentage
Lexical Hedges or Fillers	141	59,49%
Tag question	7	2,95%
Intensifier	65	27,42%
Hypercorrect grammar	-	-
Empty adjectives	6	2,53%
Superpolite form	10	4,21%
Avoidance of strong swear words	6	2,53%
Precise color terms	2	0,84%
<b>Total</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>100%</b>

This study analyzed Blanche and Stella utterances throughout eleven scenes. From the dialogue in eleven scenes, the number of each feature found are 141 lexical hedges or fillers, 7 tag question, 65 intensifier, 6 empty adjectives, 10 superpolite form, 6 avoidance of strong swear words, and 2 precise color terms.

From the table 1, it is shown that lexical hedges or fillers occurred most frequently. Lexical hedges or fillers become one of the characteristics of women's language. Lakoff (1975) reveals that lexical hedges or fillers are used by women in their utterances as a device which reflects that they are lack of confidence. The typical of women's language is, it is less assertive and sometimes contains hesitation

because the form of lexical hedge or filler often in a form of seeking for confirmation from the addressee. Women use lexical hedges when they are not really committed with what they are saying, in the other word, they do not want to make a strong statement because they are not fully sure with their utterances. Sometimes, women have difficulties in starting an utterance or even to continue their utterance. In overcoming this problem, they usually put lexical hedges in the beginning of their sentence. Hedge is also a signal that the speaker is facilitating and offering to open a discussion. Besides, women also use fillers to signal the pause and to give them time to think what is being said next in their utterances. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* especially in the eleven episodes in this study, lexical hedges or fillers has the highest frequency of emergence. Since lexical hedges or fillers' main function are to indicate that the speaker is lack of confidence, it can be predicted that the emergence of lexical hedges or fillers will be higher in the women characters' speech. As Holmes (2008) suggested, women are subordinate to men in society, so they will have less power. Since women have less power in society than men, the effect is they feel unconfident when they are having a conversation with men. Lexical hedges or fillers are also commonly found in a talk show (Kartika, 2015) and a movie (Savitri, 2012). The founding of this feature supports the previous study that lexical hedges or fillers occurred mostly in women's speech.

The second feature of women's language according to Lakoff is tag question. Lakoff (1975) claimed that tag question decreases the strength of assertion. Tag question is usually used when a speaker wants to state a claim but he or she has less confidence, so it is used in the end of sentences with expectation that the listener or addressee will give confirmation about what the speaker says so that the statement will be clear. Cameron (1990) claimed that tag question is considered as speaker-oriented because the speaker asks the addressee to confirm the speaker's proposition. In this study, there is 7 tag question found in eleven scenes. The emergence of tag question in the play is quite low. Blanche uses formal tag question such as *aren't they?*, *don't you?*, and *won't you?*. It shows the hesitancy in her utterance and she wants her addressee to confirm her statement so that it will be clear.

The third feature which is analyzed in this study is intensifier. Lakoff (1975) grouped intensifier as

women linguistic feature. The function of intensifier is to strengthen an assertion. The examples of intensifiers are *so*, *just*, *quite*, *really*, and *very*. In this study, it is found that Blanche uses intensifiers more frequently and variously than Stella. She uses intensifier 35 times in words such as *very*, *so*, *just*, and *quite*. Intensifier such as *so* and *very* are used to emphasize the speaker's opinion about something. The intensifier is also used by the speaker to persuade the addressee to take them seriously.

The fourth women linguistic feature is 'hypercorrect' grammar. Holmes (2008) claimed that 'hypercorrect' grammar is a condition in which the grammar goes beyond the norm. It usually happens when a low class people want to increase their social status by using formal form and complex grammar. But, since it is not the way they actually speak, the speaker does not know that the grammar is not correct. In this study, there is no 'hypercorrect' grammar found through Blanche or Stella's utterances. They do not use any 'hypercorrect' grammar because they are not a low status person. As we know that Blanche and Stella are from upper class family. Blanche and Stella's ancestors were French and they were born American. Their family has a property in the country called Belle Reve. Blanche is really status conscious and considers herself as a southern Belle. She loves being dress up, looking good, and having a good manner as a lady. She will avoid making a grammar mistake as much as she can to retain her reputation of being high class person.

The fifth feature of women language is empty adjective. Empty adjective is an adjective which is usually used to convey emotional feelings rather than to deliver specific information. Sometimes, when women want to show respect by responding addressee's utterance, they use empty adjective. Stella uses the word *lovely* to compliment Blanche's appearance. Besides, empty adjective can also be a feature to express admiration to something. In this study, it is found that Blanche uses more empty adjectives than Stella.

The sixth feature being analyzed in this study is 'superpolite' forms. Lakoff (1975) stated that the more particles attached in a sentence, the politer it will be. Lakoff also said that making an indirect request can also be considered as 'superpolite' forms. In making a request, women sometimes add *please*, *could*, or *would*. In this study Blanche uses superpolite form such as *If you don't mind*,

*do you mind?*, *If you will excuse me*. As Holmes (2008) pointed out, women are designated the role of modeling correct behavior in the community. Women are expected to produce correct behavior in speaking by using standard form while men use more vernacular form. Moreover, women use more standard form in order to protect her 'face'. It means that women are more status-conscious than men, so they want people to look them as higher status person than they actually are. This is linked to the idea of subordination in which women are subordinate to men. It is said that the subordinate groups must be polite including the way they speak. Women are more polite in speaking than men because they belong to subordinate groups. They have to speak more carefully and politely in order to avoid offending men.

The seventh feature of women linguistic features analyzed in this study is avoidance of strong swear words. According to Coates (2004), it is believed that men swear more than women and use more taboo words. It corresponds to the fact that women are more linguistically polite than men, so they use less swear words than men. Sometimes when women being exaggerated, they will use swear words to express their feelings, but they use less strong swear words. Lakoff (1975) pointed out that the choice of less strong expletives in women's utterance is considered as avoidance of strong swear words. Holmes (2008) suggested women are designated the role of modeling correct behavior in the community. Women are expected to produce correct behavior in speaking. They have to speak more carefully and politely in order to avoid offending men. In addition, women are the guardian of society's values. Thus, they use more polite language and avoid swear words since the society expect better behavior than men. People expect women to speak carefully and politely to be a model for their children's speech.

The last feature being analyzed is precise color terms. According to Lakoff (1975), precise color term is one of women linguistic feature in which women mention color specifically. Women's knowledge about color is wider than men so they can mention various particular colors. This is because women are generally more aware of fashion. In the eleven scenes, precise color terms can only be found when Blanche and Stella are talking about fashion in the last scene. They say *violet* instead of purple, *turquoise* instead of green,

and *lilac* instead of purple. Blanche and Stella can name colors precisely since women are more aware and close to fashion.

As the analysis of the findings reveal, it can be seen that most women use women's language features when they want to emphasize or strengthen their utterance. Some features are used because the speaker is hesitant and lack of confidence. It is related to Lakoff's (1975) statement that women have less confidence and uncertainty in conversation than men because women are powerless. Lakoff (1975, cited in Holmes, 2011) asserts that women are generally lacking status in society. Therefore, it is argued that women are more subordinate than men. Kartika (2015) also stated that when delivering speech, women seem to be less confidence when she is talking to men. She is also more polite when she talks to men. This is because women have less power and lower status in society. In addition, women use language features in their speech because if they do not speak like a lady, the society will describe them as unfeminine women. As Savitri (2012) pointed out, women tend to use cooperative and supportive way of talking while men tend to use competitive way.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

In delivering speech, there are several factors that can influence the production of utterances such as the social status in society. Lakoff (1975) proposed ten linguistic features which are considered as women language. The ten women linguistic features are lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, precise of color terms, intensifiers, 'hypercorrect' grammar, 'superpolite' forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. Those features are categorized as women linguistic features in which some of them reflect women are lack of confidence. The use of those features can be affected by some factors such as the formality of the conversation, the setting, and the participants of the talk.

The writer conducts a study based on the phenomenon about women language features in

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This study aims to find out the types of women language features and the dominant feature of women language used by the main women characters. In this study, there are some women linguistic features which are not found through Blanche and Stella's utterances in the dialogue. The most frequently used feature is lexical hedges or fillers and the absent feature is 'hypercorrect' grammar. The frequency of emergence of each women language features they used is also different. Some features reflect lack of confidence such as lexical hedges or fillers, tag question, and rising intonation. Blanche uses them more frequently when she talks to men. It is related to the idea of social status in society in which women have lower status in society than men. It also happens in the use of avoidance of strong swear words. Coates (2004) claimed that men use more taboo words than women. It implies that she tries to not using any swear words when she talks to men, stranger, and an older person because she wants to use formal language and she is more status-conscious when she is talking to them. Holmes (2008) claimed that women are more polite than men. In this study, Blanche and Stella use 'superpolite' forms when they talk to men, a stranger, and an older person. In this study, Blanche uses more intensifiers when she talks to men. The kinds of intensifiers she uses when talking to men are also more varied. She not only uses intensifiers *so* but also *very* very often.

When delivering speech, Blanche and Stella seem to be less confidence when they are talking to men. They are also more polite when they talks to men. This is because women have less power and lower status in society.

In conclusion, based on the theory of women language features, this study found out the main women characters used most of all the features. Therefore, this analysis supports Lakoff's theoretical claims that women language is primarily associated with an "out of power" social identity and women uses the women language features in their speech.

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