

STRATEGIC FEMININITY: ANALYSING WOMEN'S LANGUAGE FEATURES IN OPRAH WINFREY'S INTERVIEWS THROUGH LAKOFF'S FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The study describes how women use language by using linguistic features in televised interviews featuring prominent female figures, focusing on Oprah Winfrey and her guests, Brené Brown and Esther Perel, which become the characteristics of women's language. It intends to analyse the relevance using of Lakoff's theory and the strategy of language features produced by women's language. The study was designed using a descriptive qualitative method to describe the women's language features performed by Oprah Winfrey and her guests, Brené Brown and Esther Perel. The instrument was the researchers themselves who played an important role in collecting and analyzing the data. The data were taken from three unscripted interviews that analyzed the use and function of language features like hedges, tag questions, super polite forms, avoidance of strong assertions, empty adjectives, and emphatic stress. Thus, the data were analyzed by using frameworks from Lakoff, Tannen, Holmes, Coates, and Cameron by coding and interpreting them based on pragmatic functions and their relation. The study reveals that these linguistic features do not indicate weakness or deference, but are used as a strategy to communicate, especially in showing empathy, managing authority, and constructing relational identity. The study also shows the absence of selective features such as hypercorrect grammar and precise color terms which indicates adaptation of conversational norms in media discourse. The result supports the understanding of femininity both in performative and rhetorical contexts in which gendered speech is used to reflect identity and as a sensitive practice in a context. It also contributes to the study of language and gender that bridge the classic sociolinguistics theories and contempered discourse in emotionally expressive media

Keywords: *strategic femininity; women's language features, Lakoff's framework*

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people need to build effective communication, as language has become an essential tool for connecting with others. In addition, language can also be used to express and construct identity, cultural norms, and power relations. As language is used as a medium of interaction, it gives rise to many variations because people speak differently based on their identities. Consequently, language can vary according to gender, making gendered



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language use a prominent area of inquiry. In sociolinguistics study, linguists analyze linguistic practices that both reflect and reproduce social hierarchies. Robin Lakoff (1975) was a pioneer in the field of gender studies, introducing the concept of “women’s language” by identifying several linguistic features commonly used by women, such as hedges, tag questions, super polite forms, empty adjectives, and emphatic stress. According to her, women can be identified by observing these linguistic features, which reflect a subordinate social position in patriarchal societies. Nevertheless, this theory has been both criticized and further developed by other linguists over the following decades. A more dynamic and sensitive understanding toward the context of gendered language has been advanced by Deborah Tannen (1990) who introduced a contemporary perspective through a different model, along with Janet Holmes (1995) solidarity politeness strategy, and performativity approach by Deborah Cameron (2003). Overall, there are still significant gap in studies that applied these theories in the real-life social interaction characterized by high emotion and high visibility particularly in media discourses, where gendered performativity are both highly observed and influential.

Several literatures have showed that media environment provide an interesting context for observing communication shaped by gender. Generally, they perform complex linguistics expectation in these spaces, showing a balance emotional expression with their authority presence (Cameron, 2003; Baxter 2010). Women language can be observed in public figures who are interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, the host the reality show “The Oprah Winfrey Show”. The show serves a real example of women’s language, designed through unscripted interview and emotionally resonant dialogues in which language practice are prominently portrayed. Yet, scientific analyses have largely focused on institutional and scripted interaction, while empirical research on spontaneous female discourse in media formats is still limited. This gap indicates the need to reinvestigate a basic sociolinguistics theory, particularly those related to evolving communicative practices and continuously changing media format.

This study formulates the central research question as follows: 1) To what extent do female speakers in Oprah Winfrey’s Show employ the linguistic features based on Lakoff’s model of women’s language, 2) How are these features used contextually to manage identity and interaction. These questions arise to address the need to examine Lakoff’s theory regarding whether the women exhibit more linguistics features as he proposed. It also becomes necessary to analyze how women use these features to demonstrate their identity and credibility in front of the public. By considering the prominence of popular public figures like Oprah Winfrey, Brene Brown and Esther Perel and their role in shaping public discourse, will appraise the behavior and performance when they appear on social media. the prominence of media figures such as Oprah Winfrey, Brené Brown, and Esther Perel, and their roles in shaping public discourse. Therefore, they must find strategic ways in using linguistic features so they can offer valuable insight into modern femininity and rhetorical performance. Understanding how they strategically deploy linguistic features can yield valuable insights into modern femininity and rhetorical performance. Oprah Oprah Winfrey is a globally

renowned talk show host and media executive, is known for her empathetic interviewing style and her significant influence on public opinion. Brene Brown is a research professor and best-selling author who discusses vulnerability, bravery, and empathy in her writing, and she often discusses emotional resilience in many public forums. Besides being a psychotherapist, Esther Perel also is widely known as a relationship expert for her insights on modern intimacy and her ability to manage interpersonal themes which completed by nuance and cultural awareness. Their personalities and rhetoric styles offer a broad opportunity to explore the use of linguistic features commonly performed by women in expressing their professional identity and emotional expression.

The research also presents a specific solution, namely revision of Lakoff's framework through the strategic femininity approach, in which linguistics features- traditionally assumed as weakness – are reframed as purposeful rhetorics tool. Prior studies have shown that the elements such as *hedging* and politeness can foster empathy and strengthen interpersonal relationship (Holmes, 1995; Tannen, 1990). However, only few studies have connected these findings to the media discourse involving women authority figures. By analysing how Oprah and her guests managing the conversation that contain deeply personal and social themes, this research describes that features such as *tag question* and super polite forms do not indicate weakness, but it rather functions as strategies for identity management and intentional emotional alignment with audiences.

Some previous research had tried to reinterpret women's language by offering a perspective that more empowering, although most of them are remain at concept level. In contrast, the present research focuses on reinforcing this paradigm through empirical analysis, by demonstrating how women use linguistic features as effective rhetorical strategies in the authentic public communication. Tannen (1990) in her study found that men and women use a language differently within communicative culture in which women tending to emphasize interrelatedness and emotional resonance. Coates (1986) assumed that conversation occurs among women more collaborative rather than competitive ways that can be seen by highlighting *backchanneling*, developing topic together and showing affective expression. Cameron's study (2003) is different from the previous one where he formulizes gender beyond the binary models by defining gender as performative act that can be manifested through discourse based on context and variability. Despite the fact that these theories have enriched the theoretical framework, but empirical applications remain limited, particularly in the study of high-profiles interviews involving women exclusively.

However, several recent studies have begun to expand Lakoff's theory by examining the use of women's language in modern contexts. As Alhammadi, Rababah and Alghazo (2024) analyzed language use across gender in *Talks at Google*. The finding revealed that there is nuanced deviation produced by traditional women's language features, and also showing the influence of context and power toward linguistic choice. Similarly, Lestari, Beratha and Sukarini (2024) investigated woman's language used by the characters in the film *Lady Bird* and the result showed that female speakers frequently

employed hedges, tag questions, and empty adjectives to express their emotion in media discourse. These studies demonstrated that Lakoff's model remains a compelling framework for linguistic inquiry contemporary communicative environments. As a matter of fact, studies in institutional, academic, and corporate settings have long been conducted (e.g., Sunderland, 2006; Baxter, 2010); therefore, it is increasingly important to examine a wider variety of discourse forms, as language and gender continue to be compelling areas of sociolinguistic inquiry.

Current empirical studies demonstrate how our concept of gendered language is changing, especially with regard to the deliberate use of traditionally feminine linguistic traits in media and public discourse. Pitch variation, intensifiers, and hedging were examined by Alotaibi et al. (2025) in people with dissociative identity disorder, and they were found to be reliable markers of gender identity and authority negotiation in a variety of settings. Similar to this, high frequencies of Lakoffian features—hedges (25.73%), intensifiers (25.00%), and emphatic stress (21.53%)—were found in Brittany Higgins' broadcasted interview in Nur's (2024) study, confirming their existence and role in broadcast communication. These results demonstrate that characteristics frequently referred to as "women's language" are still used in high-stakes situations and are not outdated. Furthermore, gender disparities in speech were found to be negligible and mostly topic-driven in 2024 research of Chinese university students, highlighting the significance of context over binary beliefs. According to a 2025 digital discourse analysis, women's inclination for supporting and emotive markers—like hedges, tag inquiries, and personal pronouns—is utilized as a tool for relational interaction rather than as a sign of weakness. By demonstrating that femininity in language is strategic, adaptable, and context-sensitive, these studies close a gap in media discourse research and highlight the importance of studying the language used by well-known female public personalities like Oprah Winfrey and her guests.

This gap is particularly significant given research indicating that women in the media are frequently subjected to unfair criticism. According to Cameron (2003) and Holmes (1995), women are often punished for being either too passive or too strong, which limits the rhetorical space they can use to communicate. In these situations, Lakoff's characteristics might serve as a means of overcoming these limitations and allowing speakers to convey both warmth and authority at the same time.

The research focuses on analysing the implementation of Lakoff's model in media discourse, where interviews occur spontaneously without a script. Thus, by selecting three interviews featuring Oprah Winfrey, Brene Brown and Esther Perel, the research presents an analysis of the linguistic features used by these women in real conversation that emotionally charged and broadcast live to audiences. The data collected in this research indicate that *hedges*, *tag questions*, and *emphatic stress* appear frequently in the conversation, as they serve important function, such as expressing emotional engagement and relational solidarity. Meanwhile, two features - *hypercorrect grammar* and *precise colour term* - do not appear in the conversation, further

reinforcing the idea that gendered language can be used contextually rather than universally fixed.

The literatures that directly becomes the basis of this study are Lakoff (1975), who provided the initial typology of woman's language. Thus, Holmes (1995) emphasized the role of politeness and solidarity; and Cameron (2003) who regarded gendered discourse as performative and situational. Those perspectives similarly emphasize that linguistics features do not merely function as grammatical forms but also serve a more complex social function, extending beyond their surface-level grammatical form. Nevertheless, only a few studies have systematically mapped these features in media interviews, where emotional authenticity and public credibility are very important. Based on the theories, this research offers a new insight in understanding women's language in contemporary discourse.

Finally, the research aim at empirically evaluates the relevance of Lakoff's framework in the context of modern and unstructured public discourse. The research novelty lies on the application of classical sociolinguistics theory to media interaction that full of emotion and influence in framing public opinion. Based on the data observed from the Oprah Winfrey's interviews, the results indicate that women's language is used as strategic mechanism to show identity and to build relation rather than reflecting linguistics deficiencies. By relating historical theories and contemporary practice, this research contributes to deeper understanding of how strategy femininity is performed and perceived in today's media landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language variation is a key idea in sociolinguistics, meaning the difference in how people use language based on social and contextual factors. This variation can happen across different regions (like dialects), social groups (such as sociolects), professions, and personal identities, including age, ethnicity, education, and gender. Early researchers like Labov (1972) showed that language variation is not random but has social meaning, reflecting and reinforcing social stratification and identity. Sociolinguists believe that no form of language is truly better than another. Instead, standard and non-standard forms have different social prestige, depending on the context in which they're used. Language variation causes changes in speaking style — speakers adjust their language behavior based on formality, audience, or situation — showing that each person uses a set of language strategies for different social purposes. Hymes (1974), through his communication ethnography, emphasized that speaking patterns are rooted in cultural context, and that understanding language use requires attention to specific social norms and communication goals of a community. Furthermore, language variation is very important for understanding how language reflects and shapes identity, power relationships, and group membership. So, studies on language variation form the basis for looking at specific language patterns, including those related to gender, where certain linguistic features are connected to femininity or masculinity. Understanding this broader variation

helps us explore how gendered speech appears as a linguistic phenomenon that is shaped by social conditions and depends on context.

"Language and Woman's Place" by Lakoff (1975) is widely recognized as the foundational work in the study of language and gender. Lakoff suggests that women's speech tends to include specific linguistic features that reflect and reinforce their subordinate position in society. These ten features are: (1) Lexical fillers or hedges (such as "You know," "kind of"), (2) tag questions (such as "That's good, isn't it?"), (3) rising intonation on declarative sentences (statements that sound like questions), (4) empty adjectives (such as "cute," "beautiful"), (5) accurate color terms (such as "purple," "teal"), (6) intensifiers (such as "very," "extremely"), (7) hypercorrect grammar (strict adherence to grammar rules), (8) overly polite forms (such as "Would you mind ...," "If it's not too much trouble"), (9) avoidance of strong swear words (such as using "oh dear" instead of stronger expressions), and (10) empathetic emphasis (such as "That's really amazing"). These features are seen as signs of women's social subordination, showing their limited access to power in a patriarchal society. Lakoff explains that speaking this way is not natural but a learned cultural behavior that helps keep the gender hierarchy in place. Her model is called the "deficit" model because it quietly suggests that women's language is weaker compared to men's more assertive and authoritative style.

In response, Zimmerman and West (1975) proposed the "dominance" model, which looks at gendered communication through the lenses of power and interruptions. Their findings showed that men interrupt women more often in conversations, pointing to broader patterns of male dominance in social interactions. This approach is important because it shifts focus from individual language features to the larger structural dynamics that shape interactions, although it is limited by the narrow context in which the data was collected. Meanwhile, Tannen (1990) introduced a contrasting perspective through her "difference" model. Instead of seeing women's language as a sign of social weakness, Tannen argues that men and women operate in different communication cultures. He describes women's speech as focusing on building good relationships, intimacy, and emotional connections, whereas men's speech tends to emphasize status and exchanging information. Tannen's distinction between "relationship talk" and "report talk" has had a significant impact in both academic and popular discussions, although critics argue that it reinforces essentialist binaries and ignores the role of power in communication.

Coates added additional dimensions in 1986 and Holmes in 1995, focusing on the cooperative and supportive style of women's conversations. Coates noticed features like topic collaboration, active listening, and mutual reinforcement in all-women conversations, showing that these practices are strategic rather than submissive. Holmes further explained that women use politeness strategies and indirect speech to maintain social harmony and relational solidarity, not to signal weakness. Both scholars helped reframe women's linguistic behavior as contextually adaptive rather than universally deferential.

Cameron (2003) carries on this trend by putting out performative models that are grounded in Judith Butler's theory that gender is embodied

rather than intrinsic. Cameron claims that speakers "do" gender through language in ways that are influenced by audience, context, and goal. She faults earlier models, including Lakoff's, for not accounting for fluidity and variation. Rather than having inherent value, gender-related linguistic traits are assessed within the discursive context in which they arise. This performativity model is consistent with contemporary approaches that prioritize intersectionality, acknowledging the ways in which gender affects language use in connection to sexual orientation, race, class, and cultural background. This performativity paradigm is in line with modern methods that stress intersectionality, recognizing the ways in which gender influences language use in conjunction with race, class, sexual orientation, and cultural background.

Even though the theoretical landscape has grown considerably, institutional or controlled environments have been the primary focus of these models' empirical implementations. In their studies of gendered language in corporate and educational settings, Sunderland (2006) and Baxter (2010) found both recurring trends and situational variations. While acknowledging the importance of gendered speech characteristics, these studies also point out that their occurrence and function differ depending on the context and the dynamics of the interlocutor. Research using these frameworks for high-visibility, emotionally charged, and spontaneous discourse—like that found in televised media interviews—is still lacking,

One special and little-studied location for gendered language research is the media setting. Talk shows with women present, in particular, provide rich data for studying the use of linguistic elements in emotionally charged, real-time talks. This environment is best represented by Oprah Winfrey's interviews, which are dialogic, unscripted exchanges in which audience rapport, authority, and emotional resonance are all present. Few academics have looked at the communication tactics of female media characters, whose jobs also involve controlling public image, empathy, and authenticity. Baxter (2010) is one of the few who has studied the language of female leadership in business contexts.

Therefore, the literature on women's language has undergone substantial theoretical diversification, moving from static and binary models to dynamic, context-responsive interpretations. While Lakoff's (1975) framework remains a valuable diagnostic tool, it requires reinterpretation in light of contemporary discourse theories and empirical realities. The performative and intersectional approaches developed by Cameron (2003) and others underscore the need to view gendered speech as strategic and fluid. Nevertheless, the lack of empirical analysis in public, media-driven communication represents a critical gap. This study aims to fill that void by applying classical and modern theories to Oprah Winfrey's interviews, exploring how strategic femininity is enacted through linguistic features in emotionally charged and widely broadcasted interactions. By doing so, it contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of how women use language to perform identity, manage authority, and cultivate connection in modern media discourse.

METHOD

A qualitative descriptive research design based on sociolinguistic analysis is used in this study. Examining how linguistic traits typically associated with women's speech-specifically, those expressed in Lakoff's (1975) framework-appear in broadcast interviews is the main goal. Researchers can record and understand gendered language features in their natural state without experimental modification by using the descriptive technique, which is appropriate for examining language in natural settings. This method is consistent with earlier sociolinguistic research that focused on pragmatic meaning and context sensitivity (Holmes, 1995; Cameron, 2003).

The three publicly available video interviews to make up the data chosen from *YouTube* and presented or conducted by Oprah Winfrey. These consist of: 1. Oprah Winfrey shares her "one regret" in life that she wishes she could go back and fix. 2. Oprah and Esther Perel Discuss the Three Things Every Person Must Discover. 3. Super Soul Sunday: Rising Strong with Brené Brown. Each interview features an all-female or woman-to-woman discourse, offering a focused lens for examining the use of gendered linguistic features. These interviews were selected based on their emotionally expressive content, the prominence of the speakers, Oprah and her guests, and the unscripted nature of the dialogue, which allows for authentic language use especially for women language features. The durations range from 15 to 30 minutes, providing a rich corpus for in-depth linguistic analysis.

The data were collected using note-taking, following several systematic steps. Video Identification was conducting by selecting videos according to three main criteria:

1. Emotional depth – The extent to which the interview content demonstrated emotional expressiveness, assessed through the presence of verbal and non-verbal cues such as tone modulation, emotional vocabulary (e.g., expressions of vulnerability, empathy, or self-reflection), and instances of affective responses from both interviewer and guest. Videos in which both speakers displayed at least three instances of emotional self-disclosure or empathetic exchange were prioritized.
2. Speaker gender – Each interview featured female speakers in both the interviewer and guest roles, ensuring that the data represent all-women or woman-to-woman discourse contexts, in line with the study's focus on women's linguistic features.
3. Thematic significance to interpersonal dynamics and identity – The topic of discussion had to revolve around issues of self-concept, relationships, empowerment, or emotional well-being, reflecting how language constructs identity and social connection. This was measured by analysing the recurring thematic keywords in titles, descriptions, and dialogue (e.g., *vulnerability, connection, courage, authenticity*).

After collecting data, the researchers do the following steps: 1) Manual Transcription: Tone, pauses, overlapping speech, and forceful stress were among the verbal and paralinguistic cues that were taken into consideration

when transcribing spoken language by hand. This guarantees the preservation of pragmatic signals that are necessary for the analysis of gendered language. 2) Utterance Selection: Only utterances that clearly demonstrated one or more of Lakoff's identified features were retained for coding and interpretation. Transcription was carried out with minimal modification to preserve the authenticity of each speaker's discourse. Quotes were recorded verbatim, including hesitations and informal constructions.

The analytical framework integrates Lakoff's (1975) original model with complementary insights from Tannen (1990), Holmes (1995), Coates (1986), and Cameron (2003). Each utterance was analyzed for the presence and function of specific linguistic features, categorized as follows: - Lexical hedges or fillers (e.g., "I think," "maybe") - Tag questions (e.g., "It's true, isn't it?") - Superpolite forms (e.g., "Would you mind if...") - Avoidance of strong assertions (e.g., "It seems that...") - Empty adjectives (e.g., "lovely," "adorable") - Emphatic stress (e.g., "It was so, so meaningful.")

Each linguistic marker or linguistics feature was interpreted in terms of its communicative function—whether it expressed politeness, mitigated assertion, fostered solidarity, or performed emotional work. Tannen's "rapport talk," Holmes' solidarity politeness, Coates' cooperative discourse model, and Cameron's performativity framework guided contextual interpretation.

Using a manual coding approach, utterances were categorized according to how well they fit Lakoffian properties. To guarantee interpretive correctness, each code was then triangulated using interactional cues, speaker purpose, and context. Using color-coded categories, pertinent aspects were first tagged as part of the coding process. To identify numerous functions, utterances are cross-referenced with theoretical models. An explanation of each feature's socio-discursive function through contextual annotation. For instance, the expression "Would you mind sharing that with us?" was classified as a solidarity mechanism (Holmes), a rapport-building tactic (Tannen), and a super polite form (Lakoff). This multi-theoretical interpretation strengthens the analysis and reveals the multifunctionality of gendered speech.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings from the linguistic analysis of three televised interviews hosted by Oprah Winfrey, with guests Brené Brown and Esther Perel. Drawing on Lakoff's (1975) framework of women's language, the data were coded and analyzed for six primary features: hedges, tag questions, superpolite forms, avoidance of strong assertions, empty adjectives, and emphatic stress. The analysis also integrates insights from complementary theories by Holmes (1995), Tannen (1990), Coates (1986), and Cameron (2003) to contextualize how these features function in emotionally expressive and public media discourse.

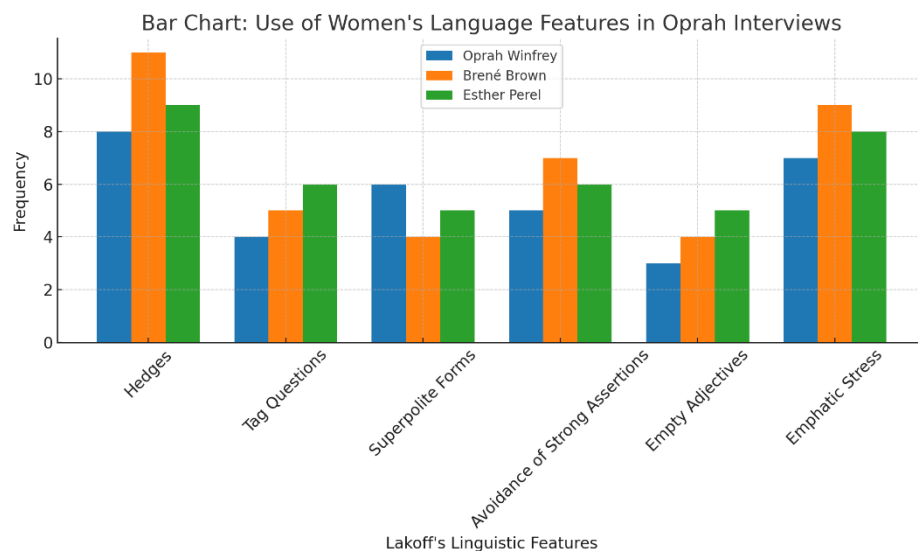
Table1. Summary of Lakoff's Women's Language Features Across Speakers

Features	Oprah Winfrey	Brene Brown	Esther Perel
Hedges	8	11	9

Tag questions	4	5	6
Super polite Forms	6	4	5
Avoidance of Strong Assertions	5	7	6
Empty Adjectives	3	4	5
Emphatic stress	7	9	8

It can be seen from Table 1 that Brene Brown performs more linguistics markers that commonly associated by woman language. She often use hedges (11) and emphatic stress (9) to supporting her emotionally expressive and reflective communication style, which aligns with her public persona as a researcher who emphasizes vulnerability and empathy. Ester Perel. On the other hand, shows a strong use of tag question (6) and affective language, reflecting therapeutic and dialogic approach in interpersonal discussions. Oprah Winfrey, while performing all six features, tend to use them with slightly lower frequency compared to her guests. This can be interpreted as part of her role as a host, where she strategically balances emotional engagement and authority to maintain conversational flow and allow her guests' narratives to take center stage. The analysis focused exclusively on the linguistic features used by the three female figures, namely; Oprah Winfrey, Brené Brown, and Esther Perel, without including their guests. Therefore, the comparison is limited to these speakers. The Figure 1 below highlights their distinct communicative patterns, showing that each woman employs women's language features strategically in accordance with her conversational role and professional identity.

Figure 1. Lakoff Linguistic Features



a. Hedges

Hedges were among the most frequent linguistic features observed across all three interviews. These devices, such as "I think," "maybe," and "I

guess,” serve to lessen the assertiveness of a statement, and are frequently interpreted in the literature as indicators of uncertainty or politeness (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1995).

Excerpts:

Oprah Winfrey: *“I kind of felt like... maybe I wasn’t ready for that yet.”*

Brené Brown: *“I think it’s about being seen and still feeling safe.”*

Esther Perel: *“Maybe we all experience this at different intensities.”*

By analysing these data, it can be concluded that the utterances are categorized as hedges, as they use linguistic elements to express uncertainty, tentativeness, or subjectivity as they said *“kind of...”, “maybe”, and “I think”*. All utterances align with Lakoff’s (1975) and Holmes’s (1995) theories which state that hedges are used to soften what the speakers said. They also function to reduce assertiveness and signal openness to alternative perspective.

In relation to the context, by using the hedges, each speaker aims to create a conversation that feels safely and empathetic, so the interviews show relational and emotional tone. When Oprah Winfrey said, *“I kind of felt like.....maybe I wasn’t ready for that yet”*, it reflects her hesitation and emotional reflection, inviting vulnerability rather than asserting certainty. Brene Brown uses the hedge *“I think....”* in her utterance *“I think it’s about being seen and still feeling safe.”* not only to express tentativeness but also to acknowledge the emotional disclosure in an empathetic and non-authoritative manner. By qualifying her statement *“I think....”* Brene avoids positioning her self as someone who defines Oprah’s experience, but she presents her reflection as a shared interpretation.

Thus, the strategic use of hedging allows Brene to maintain relational alignment and create a dialog space to ensure emotional safety and equality. This indicates that hedges serve an important interpersonal and affective function. Moreover, they also show empathy and shared rather uncertainty or lack of confidence.

b. Tag Questions

Tag questions such as *“isn’t it?”* or *“don’t you think?”* were observed across the data, aligning with Lakoff’s (1975) claim that women employ these to reduce assertiveness and seek affirmation. Tannen (1990) further explains that such forms are typical of rapport-oriented talk.

Excerpts:

Oprah Winfrey: *“You know what I mean, don’t you?”*

Brené Brown: *“It’s hard to trust completely, isn’t it?”*

Esther Perel: *“We want love, but we fear it too, right?”*

These utterances are classified as tag questions because they combine a statement with a short interrogative clause such as *“don’t you?”*, *“isn’t it?”*, or *“right?”*. Women commonly use tag question to invite agreement, seek solidarity and maintain conversational rapport (Coates, 1986) (Holmes, 1995).

In the interviews, the speakers use tag questions to foster shared understanding and emotional resonance. Oprah Winfrey’s *“You know what I mean, don’t you?”*, Brené Brown’s *“It’s hard to trust completely, isn’t it?”*, and Esther Perel’s *“We want love, but we fear it too, right?”* all illustrate how tag

questions invite agreement and evoke collective empathy. These excerpts show that tag questions function as interactive and relational tools, enabling the speakers to balance emotional openness with authority. Rather than signalling doubt, the use of tag questions demonstrates the speakers' awareness of audience engagement and their effort to build consensus and inclusion, demonstrating that tag questions serve as strategic linguistics devices for maintaining empathy and relational harmony in emotionally expressive conversation.

c. Superpolite Forms

Superpolite forms were notably used when speakers transitioned to sensitive topics or made personal requests. Lakoff (1975) categorized these forms as expressions of deference, while Holmes (1995) highlighted their strategic use in preserving social harmony.

Excerpt:

Oprah Winfrey: "Would it be okay if I ask you something more personal?"

Brené Brown: "Do you mind if I tell a quick story?"

Esther Perel: "May I suggest another way of framing it?"

The use of modal verbs ("would", "do", "may") and indirect questioning in these excerpts, demonstrate that Oprah seeks permission before asking a very personal question. In Excerpt 1, she employs a polite request to gain consent prior to addressing a potentially intimate topic, reflecting relational sensitivity and conversational ethics. Brown's indirect questioning as it is shown in excerpt 2 indicates her respect toward the audience, as she introduces herself in a polite way and considerate manner by saying "*Do you mind if.....*" A similar strategy is also employed by Perel in Excerpt 3 by saying "*May I suggest....*" conveys her politeness and authority which is align with her role as a counselor who guides while maintaining equality. The data support Lakoff's theory that women possess their distinctive linguistic features that reflect consideration and social awareness. They also align with performative perspective Cameroon (2003) which states that politeness can function as a form of relational power in public interaction.

d. Avoidance of Strong Assertions

Avoidance of strong assertions was a recurring strategy that speakers used to maintain dialogic openness and prevent confrontational tones. Lakoff (1975) identified this feature as reflecting a desire to remain non-authoritative, though later theories offer a more nuanced view.

Excerpts:

Oprah Winfrey: "It seems to me that experience was transformative."

Brené Brown: "I'd say it probably plays out in a lot of our relationships."

Esther Perel: "There might be another way to interpret this."

It can be seen from the data that these excerpts demonstrate the way of speaker to soften her utterances through mitigating phrase such as "*It seems to me...*", "*I'd say....*", "*might be...*". The use of the word "*probably*" in the excerpt 2 "*I'd say it probably plays out in a lot of our relationships.*" does not mean "*doubt about her relationship*" but it rather shows humility and openness, encouraging the audience to think and reflect on the idea themselves instead of positioning her as the only authority on the topic. It is similar to what Perel

says in her utterance “*There might be another way to interpret this.*” where the use of modal “might” give chance for audience to interpret her intention, encouraging dialogues instead of closure. These excerpts align with what Tannen’s (1990) describes as “rapport talk” that emphasize on linguistics softening that enhances relational intimacy. While, the speaker’s avoidance of categorical statements reflects both Lakoff’s view of non-assertiveness and Camaeron’s (2003) perspective that women often perform relational awareness through linguistics restraint.

d. Empty Adjectives

Empty adjectives such as “lovely,” “amazing,” and “adorable” were used frequently as affective intensifiers. While Lakoff (1975) saw these as non-substantive, more recent scholarship interprets them as performing social functions of praise and emotional resonance (Holmes, 1995).

Excerpts:

Oprah Winfrey: “That’s just beautiful.”

Brené Brown: “It’s a lovely way to put it.”

Esther Perel: “It’s such a charming way to explain that.”

Based on Lakoff’s theory (1975), these utterances can be categorized as empty adjective as he said that the use of adjective such as “*beautiful*,” “*lovely*” and “*charming*” in those utterances were originally considered “empty” since they only use them to express emotional approval rather than saying the factual description. In fact, the use of empty adjective is usually used by women to create a social and relational function rather than merely decorative one.

By saying “*That’s just beautiful*” Oprah Winfrey expresses validation and admiration, showing a positive emotional climate. While Brené Brown’s says “*It’s a lovely way to put it*” functions as a supportive response, acknowledging the interlocutor’s phrasing and contributing to mutual respect in dialogue. Similarly, Esther Perel’s “*It’s such a charming way to explain that*” expresses appreciation for her conversational partner’s insight, creating interpersonal warmth and alignment. Therefore, empty adjective usually used by women as strategic affective markers that build empathy, soften evaluation, and maintain relational harmony. It is supported by Holmes (1995) who states that such features serve as instrument of relational politeness and emotional bonding rather than indicators of linguistics weakness.

e. Emphatic Stress

Emphatic stress was deployed across interviews to convey emotional intensity and underline the significance of personal insights. Lakoff (1975) categorized this as a stylistic feature linked to emotionality, and Cameron (2003) views such expressiveness as a performative enactment of gender.

Excerpt:

Oprah Winfrey: “I was so, so moved by that.”

Brené Brown: “That was profoundly, profoundly healing.”

Esther Perel: “It was deeply, deeply unsettling—but necessary.”

The repetition and stress serve rhetorical and emotional functions, underscoring the sincerity and gravity of the speaker’s experience. This aligns

with performative models of gender, suggesting that heightened expressiveness is both a communicative and identity-affirming act.

The analysis confirms that six of Lakoff's ten linguistic features were present and functionally significant in the data. Rather than signaling deference or lack of confidence, these features were employed as strategic tools for building rapport, expressing emotional authenticity, and managing identity in a public setting. The absence of some features further emphasizes the contextual nature of gendered language use.

The findings substantiate the argument that gendered linguistic forms, when situated in media discourse, are neither static nor inherently subordinate. Instead, they emerge as nuanced, adaptable, and rhetorically effective components of strategic femininity, reaffirming the importance of recontextualizing classical linguistic theory within modern discourse environments.

Discussion

The findings from this study affirm that linguistic features traditionally associated with women's language, as outlined in Lakoff's (1975) seminal framework, continue to manifest in modern media discourse. However, their function appears to have evolved significantly. Rather than signaling social deficiency or lack of authority, these features serve as dynamic, context-sensitive strategies that female speakers employ to manage identity, foster connection, and exercise rhetorical influence. This reinterpretation supports the transition in sociolinguistic literature from deficit-based models to performative and strategic views of gendered communication, as advanced by scholars such as Tannen (1990), Holmes (1995), and Cameron (2003).

The prominence of hedges, tag questions, super polite forms, and emphatic stress in the speech of Oprah Winfrey, Brené Brown, and Esther Perel illustrates the rhetorical utility of these features. For instance, Oprah's use of expressions like "I kind of felt like... maybe I wasn't ready for that yet" and Brown's frequent hedging ("I think it's about being seen and still feeling safe") do not reflect uncertainty but rather a deliberate effort to create space for reflection, inclusion, and empathetic resonance. Holmes (1995) observed that hedges can function to enhance politeness and soften imposition, while Tannen (1990) classified them under rapport-building discourse. In this study, hedges serve not to weaken arguments but to open dialogue and relational alignment, particularly in emotionally laden interactions.

Similarly, tag questions such as "It's hard to trust completely, isn't it?" or "We want love, but we fear it too, right?" are deployed not to seek validation, but to invite empathy and co-construction of meaning. Coates (1986) emphasized the collaborative function of such discourse elements, especially in all-female interactions, suggesting that they are integral to cooperative communication rather than symptomatic of indecisiveness. In the context of high-profile interviews, these features function as tools for inviting shared reflection and maintaining audience engagement.

Super polite forms, another salient feature identified in the data, reflect the speakers' sensitivity to emotional boundaries and the interpersonal stakes of the conversation. Phrases like "Would you mind if I ask something more

personal?" or "May I suggest another way of framing it?" highlight how speakers exercise rhetorical control while preserving mutual respect. Such expressions underscore Lakoff's (1975) observations about women's deference strategies, but in this setting, they appear more as performative acts of care and professionalism. Cameron (2003) would argue that these forms enact a relational femininity tailored to public discourse, where both emotional openness and credibility are paramount.

Moreover, the avoidance of strong assertions, seen in utterances like "It seems to me that experience was transformative" or "There might be another way to interpret this," contributes to dialogic openness. Rather than imposing fixed truths, these constructions accommodate listener interpretation, reinforcing Tannen's (1990) view of women's preference for interactional harmony. In media discourse, this stylistic choice may be especially effective for maintaining a non-confrontational, inclusive tone, aligning with both relational and rhetorical objectives.

The use of empty adjectives and emphatic stress also reveals the expressive and affective dimensions of the speakers' language. Words such as "lovely," "amazing," and "beautiful," often dismissed by early theorists as superficial, are used here to reinforce emotional alignment and interpersonal support. Emphatic expressions like "deeply, deeply unsettling" or "so, so moved" provide linguistic markers of sincerity and underscore the gravity of the message. These patterns challenge the notion that emotional expressiveness is a liability in public speech; instead, they demonstrate how affective intensity can enhance rhetorical authenticity. Cameron's (2003) performativity model is particularly relevant here, as it captures how gendered identity is actively constructed through discursive choices that reflect emotional and relational expertise.

Notably, the relative absence of some features from Lakoff's original list—such as precise color terms and hypercorrect grammar—reinforces the contextual nature of gendered language. These omissions suggest that media discourse requires a balance between informality and authority, and that speakers strategically adapt their language to meet the demands of the setting. In line with Cameron (2003), such variability supports the idea that gender is not merely reflected in language but performed differently across contexts.

The cumulative evidence indicates that Lakoff's features remain useful heuristic tools for identifying gendered linguistic patterns. However, their meaning and function must be interpreted through the lens of performative, pragmatic, and relational frameworks. The findings from this study thus support the claim that what was once seen as deficient or passive is better understood as rhetorically strategic. In particular, the speakers studied demonstrate how femininity in language can be aligned with leadership, emotional authenticity, and persuasive power in public communication.

From a broader perspective, these findings contribute to the evolving discourse on strategic femininity. Oprah Winfrey and her guests are not merely participants in conversations; they are influential communicators who actively shape public narratives. Their language choices illustrate how gendered communication can function as both a means of self-presentation and a tool for cultivating trust, credibility, and resonance with diverse

audiences. As Baxter (2010) has argued in the context of female leadership, feminine speech styles can convey both competence and relational intelligence, particularly when situated within emotionally expressive discourse genres.

In revisiting Lakoff's framework through the lens of contemporary media interaction, this study affirms the continued relevance of her insights while also revealing their limitations. Gendered language is not a monolith, nor is it fixed. It is adaptive, strategic, and deeply embedded in the social, emotional, and rhetorical demands of the moment. The female speakers analyzed here exemplify how linguistic features traditionally perceived as soft or subordinate can, in fact, be recontextualized as powerful tools of influence and identity performance. These findings invite a reconsideration of how femininity is constructed and understood in language, particularly in public and emotionally charged communicative spaces.

Thus, this research contributes to the broader sociolinguistic understanding of how gender is enacted in media, reaffirming that language is both a reflection and performance of identity. In doing so, it also highlights the importance of context-aware frameworks and methodological sensitivity in the study of gendered discourse. Further research may benefit from extending this analysis to include male speakers, cross-cultural media contexts, or digital communication platforms to expand on how strategic femininity is negotiated in diverse interactional environments.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that linguistic features traditionally associated with women's language—such as hedges, tag questions, super polite forms, avoidance of strong assertions, empty adjectives, and emphatic stress—continue to appear in public discourse but serve new strategic purposes. Rather than reflecting social subordination, these features function as tools for emotional alignment, relational engagement, and identity performance in high-stakes, televised interviews. By examining the speech of Oprah Winfrey, Brené Brown, and Esther Perel, this study challenges the deficit interpretation of gendered language and reinforces performative and context-sensitive models.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its recontextualization of Lakoff's foundational theory within contemporary media interaction, offering evidence that strategic femininity operates through nuanced linguistic choices. Implications extend to gender studies, discourse analysis, and communication education, encouraging a shift from static typologies to flexible, pragmatic interpretations of gendered speech. Future research may build on this work by examining similar patterns in male-female interactions, digital communication, or cross-cultural media settings.

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