

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles”

(Tannen,1992: 42)

Both male and female styles of communication have their positive and negative effects. Problem arises when men decode women’s conversational style according to their rules and vice versa. Hence, this leads to striking misunderstanding between the sexes, and to incorrect interpretations of what has been said. Deborah Tannen’s (1992) statement concurred with Jennifer Coates (1986) that “[...] men pursue a style of interaction based on power, while women pursue a style based on solidarity and support” (Coates, 1986: 115). Furthermore, Coates (1986) concluded that both male and female conversations followed their own rules; therefore, men and women had different expectations of a conversation. Both sexes differ in their views of what makes a good conversation, how a conversation should progress or develop, how important it is to let a current speaker finish his or her turn and how important it is to show support to the interlocutor actively. Therefore, in the following passages the researcher intends to describe some means of communication used differently by men and women and which are consequently misinterpreted.

1.2 BACKGROUND

1.2 1. Women and Language

The notion that men and women speak differently led to research in sex differences in language. Early work on women’s language tended to be more on casual

observation and introspection rather on empirical research. Furthermore, these earlier researches were very much influenced by the preconceptions on the roles of men and women. However, they have successfully made women's language an important issue in linguistics. Since the publication of many of these works, research findings on women and language have been very insightful. These studies have managed to show the differences in male and female usage of the features of language such as interruptions, questions, polite forms and prosodic features; all of which are a part of one's communicative competence. According to Milroy (1980) communicative competence involves "knowledge of when to speak or to be silent: how to speak on each occasion: how to interpret and communicate meanings of respect, seriousness, humour, politeness or intimacy" (Coates and Cameron, 1988: 64).

1.2.2 Co-operative Vs. Competitive Conversation

In studying women's interactions, linguists have focused on certain features of conversation and the differences in the use of these features between men and women. Women's speech in single-sex groups has a high frequency of linguistic features that are supportive of each group member. However, men's speech is information-oriented rather than socially-oriented and can be described as being competitive than co-operative.

Men's conversational style is based on competitiveness whereas women's is based on co-operativeness. According to Coates's (1998), the women in her research made use of gradual topic development, frequent usage of minimal responses, overlapping speech and linguistic forms which mitigates what the other speakers said. These features of language produced co-operative talk. Unlike women, men as mentioned by Holmes (1995), used all these devices to verify the validity of information received. Men's talk often focused on the content of the talk and not on

feelings or how it affected other members of the group (Holmes, 1995). Females, according to Holmes (1995) appear to give more attention to the needs of others and regulate their talk to accommodate their addressees' style of speech. Coates (1998) argued that when women talk, their real aim was to maintain social relationship over the exchange of information. Men on the other hand, tend to see language as a tool for obtaining and conveying information, to resolve problems and to reach decisions (Holmes, 1995). Holmes (1995) supported this by saying that since women enjoyed talking and regarded it as something of great importance and a means of keeping in touch, language was therefore used "to establish, nurture, and develop personal relationships" (Holmes, 1995: 2). Coates further mentioned that women's goal of consolidating friendship was reflected in the way they produced talk. Their co-operative talk is a joint talk where everybody is given equal chance to speak, contribute to the conversation, and develop a collaborative discourse. In sum, research that has been carried out in this field suggested that men adopted a competitive style to overturn other speakers' contributions and to assert their views as strongly as possible while women on the other hand, adopted a co-operative style to add rather than demolish other conversationalists' contributions.

1.2.3 Do women and men interact differently?

A variety of explanations have been provided by researchers on gender differences in language use. Some researchers like Chodorow (1974), Gilligan (1982) and Boe (1987) said that one of the differences involved psychology (Holmes, 1995: 7). Men were believed to focus more on hierarchical relationships and they prefer to use linguistic devices that assert control, while women would concentrate on connections and tended to use linguistic devices that involve others and emphasise the interpersonal nature of communication. A second explanation would be socialisation.

According to Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen (1987), boys and girls experience different patterns of socialisation which in turn lead to the different ways of using and interpreting language (Holmes, 1995: 7). Most boys and girls develop different styles of interaction during their childhood. The boys' interaction tended to be more competitive and control-oriented while the girls' interaction was co-operative and focused on closeness. A third explanation would be the unequal distribution of power in society. Zimmerman and West (1975) and West and Zimmerman (1987), as quoted by Holmes (1995), stated that men's greater social power gave them the authority to outline and control situations and dominate the interaction. Deuchar (1988), as mentioned in Holmes's 1995, also suggested that women, who were deemed to be powerless, had to be polite. Therefore, in a community where women were seen to be the subordinate group, they were likely to be more linguistically polite than men who were in control of the interactions. The subordinate group tended to stress values and attitudes that promote in-group solidarity (Holmes, 1995: 8).

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Over the past 30 years, research into language and gender has resulted in a comprehensive study of the features and structure of women's talk in both mixed and single gender interaction. (Lakoff, 1975; Zimmerman and West, 1975; Edelsky, 1981; Fishman, 1983; Tannen, 1984, 1990; Hirschman, 1994).

Research on the differences in language used by men and women have developed since the 1970's especially in conversational style. Robin Lakoff (1975) claimed that the style of language typically used by women "submerges a woman's personal identity by denying her the means to express herself strongly on the one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject-matter and uncertainty about it" (Lakoff, 1975:7). The features that were characteristic of women's speech-

style denied women the means to express themselves strongly and made them sound trivial and uncertain. Lakoff (1975) worked on the principle that women's speech patterns are worse than men's in that they confirm women's subordinate social status and prevent them from being treated as equals.

Jennifer Coates' research (1996, 1998) has rightly shown that women's conversations in all-female groups often build on a framework of co-operativity. Coates (1998) examined in detail four formal features; topic development, minimal response, simultaneous speech, and epistemic modality, typically found in women's discourse. These formal features of women's language help to produce co-operative talk.

To the writer's knowledge, there has been no research done specifically on the formal features of Malay women's conversation in Malaysia and how these features promote co-operative talk. Therefore, this study intends to explore this new field of research, as what Thorne and Henley have pointed out that it is a "virtually untouched area" (Thorne and Henley, 1975:30).

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the formal features of language most commonly used by a group of Malay women in their interactions. The researcher also intends to describe the functions of each of the features used in the subjects' conversations and conclude whether these features promote the idea of co-operation in the conversation among them.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the study is presented in the form of research questions as stated below:

1. What are the formal features of language found in an all-female Malay group?
2. What are the functions of these formal features in the all-female Malay group conversations ?
3. Do these formal features promote the sense of co-operativeness in women's discourse ?
4. Are the formal features of all-female Malay group similar to white, middle class English women ?

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Gender-	Refers to a social distinction between masculine and feminine (Graddol and Swann,1989: 7).
Sex-	Relates to the biological and by and large binary distinction between male and female (Graddol and Swann,1989: 7). It is concerned with physical differences determined at birth.
Status-	Refers to one's social position or rank in relation to others, that is, the importance s/he has in the eyes of others, as well as the degree of respect s/he commands.
Power-	Refers to the right to control another person's behaviour or to make decisions about matters concerning others. The bases of power are physical strength, age, birth, sex, wealth, profession or institutionalized role, army, state or within the family itself (Jariah Md Jan, 1999; 55).
Solidarity-	Concerns the social distance between people, the social characteristics they share i.e. religion , family, profession, sex, race, interests, etc. and the frequency of contact (Jariah Md Jan, 1999; 57).

Communicative competence- Dell Hymes (1971) used this term to refer to what a speaker needs to know in order to be an effective member of a speech community (Hymes 1971 cited in Coates J. and Cameron D. 1988; 63)

Cooperativeness- refers to a type of conversation where speakers work together to produce shared meaning (Coates, 1998; 147)

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study is to identify the formal features of the language of an all-female group. This study hopes to measure the extent of these formal features of women's language in promoting the notion of co-operativeness. The term co-operativeness refers to the conversation where speakers work together to produce a joint text (Coates, 1998; 141). Coates (1998; 130) further adds that the aim of women's talk is to maintain social relationships and consolidate friendships. It is hoped that this study will further shed some light in the area of Malay women's discourse in Malaysia and compare it with parallel studies that have been conducted on women's speech in the United States and Britain.

1.8 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1. This study will focus on the formal features of women's language and how these features of language in an all-female group promote co-operative talk. Data is taken from interactions that occur in a staff room where all the participants are lecturers. All the participants have known each other for at least a year.
2. The researcher will look at verbal output. Non-verbal communication is important but it is not the focus of this study.
3. Other than non-verbal communication, elements like intonation, grammar,

vocabulary and syntax also make up a conversation. However, these elements will not be analysed *per se*.

4. The data for this study will be taken from conversations in English. The participants are all qualified English lecturers who use English in their daily interactions.

1.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. This study involved audio recording; so the subjects' non-verbal communication like gestures, head nods, smiles etc. could not be captured on tape. As the recording was done discreetly, the researcher could not jot down notes. Therefore, some vital information might be lost and could not be included in the findings.
2. The research is not on the prosodic features of language because the focus of the study is to identify the features used by the conversationalists to form collaborative or joint talk. So, elements like intonation, syntax, grammar and lexis will not be examined.
3. In general, the data in this study represents one group of Malay women; therefore this research may not represent all Malay women and the data found in this study might differ from other similar studies.

1.10 CONCLUSION

In short, it is evident that the research into the field of women's conversation especially in Malaysia is still new. Therefore, this study in part is to instil awareness amongst Malaysians as well as other researchers to analyse women's talk. Clearly, this issue needs to be debated further by means of more in-depth research - This is what the researcher has endeavoured to do.