THE LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOUR OF MEN AND WOMEN. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT: The linguistic behaviour of men and women. Gender differences in freedom of conscience discourse.
The study analyses the sociolinguistic differences between men and women in general, with particular focus on the register used to describe freedom of conscience. After a brief theoretical introduction that presents some basic concepts used in the sociolinguistic analysis, the study continues with an analysis of some social media posts pertaining to men and women alike. We tried to identify the differences and create a sociolinguistic profile of the users with reference to style, tone and word choice.

Keywords: *sociolinguistics, gender differences, freedom of conscience, speech, social media*

Theoretical framework

The notion that men and women communicate differently, discussing diverse topics and for varying purposes, is widely accepted. Yet, the question of *why* these differences exist remains a source of debate and confusion. A traditional explanation, as proposed by John Gray in his book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, suggests that communication gaps between genders stem from differences in brain structure, hormonal influences, and social conditioning. Over time, however, researchers worldwide have sought to develop a deeper understanding of these gender-based communication differences. Why, then, does the language of men and women diverge so noticeably? After all, both sexes use the same language. A substantial body of research indicates that gender does indeed influence linguistic patterns. These distinctions can be observed in speech habits,

conversational styles, and word choice. The contrasts in communication are often most apparent in interactions between men and women. Coates[1] believes that differences between men and women are to be found in syntax, morphology and pronunciation. According to linguist Deborah Tannen, *conversational style* refers to the way meaning is conveyed and interpreted during dialogue. She says "Conversation style is mostly influenced by ethnic background or family communicative habits. Besides delivering the purpose and goal of the conversation, communicating style creates an impression on the speaker."[2]

In conversations between men and women, it is often observed that men tend to dominate the discussion, speaking more frequently, while women take on the role of active listeners. In such interactions, men are more likely to maintain control of the conversation and continue speaking, whereas women often focus on attentively listening to their male counterparts. At times, women may pause during the exchange, either to reflect on what has been said or because they are uncertain about how to respond next. "Women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say"[3]. This statement illustrates how women frequently pause mid-conversation without progressing further.

Miscommunication between men and women is a common occurrence, largely due to the significant differences in their conversational norms. From an early age, boys and girls are socialized to interact in distinct ways, beginning with their experiences on the playground. Girls typically use conversation as a means to build and sustain close relationships, emphasizing connection and empathy. In contrast, boys often employ conversation to establish status or dominance within their peer groups. Girls are taught to offer feedback tactfully to avoid offending others and to interpret their peers' communication accurately, whereas boys tend to use language to attract attention, maintain an audience, and reinforce their social standing. These early communication patterns persist into adulthood, frequently leading to misunderstandings between men and women. Conversations between men and women often follow a recognizable pattern in

1 Jennifer Coates, *Women, men and language: A sociolinguistic account of sex differences in language*, London & New-York, Longman, 1986.

2 Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Conversational Interaction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 205.

3 *Ibidem*.

which women tend to ask the majority of questions. Women typically use questions as a way to sustain the dialogue, encouraging others to elaborate and contribute further. However, the interpretation and function of questions differ across genders. For women, questions serve as conversational tools—to initiate, maintain, and deepen discussions while expressing interest and inviting engagement. In contrast, men often interpret questions more literally, viewing them primarily as requests for specific information. Additionally, women frequently employ tag questions, hedges, and qualifiers in their speech to encourage participation and create a more inclusive conversational environment.

Deborah Tannen, a leading scholar in communication studies, explored various ethnic communities that share the same language but differ in their communication styles. Her research revealed that cultural influences have a far greater impact on communication than gender identity alone. Tannen argues that women typically use conversation to build and maintain intimacy, while men often view communication as a means of establishing or reinforcing status. These contrasting conversational goals and styles reflect distinct cultural orientations, with neither approach being inherently superior to the other. She also argues that "men tend to interrupt more and ask questions less. In fact, the female tendency to ask more questions sometimes results in receiving lower grades from male professors who view frequent questioning as proof that a student knows less than her male counterparts".[4] Another researcher that analysed the differences between men and women is Julie Reid[5] who, after conducting research on minimal conversation pairs, claims that there are differences as indicated by previous research.

The notion that early childhood communication differences are entirely socially constructed does not fully capture the complexity of the issue. Since women have traditionally taken primary responsibility in raising children, they play a crucial role in early language development. This raises the question of when and how boys begin to adopt a distinctly masculine communication style. From a young age, children are guided to display gender-specific linguistic behaviours. For example, boys may be permitted to use coarse or assertive language, whereas girls are often encouraged to

4 Deborah Tannen, *You just don't understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p..105.

5 Julie Reid, *Gender Differences in Minimal Responses*, La Trobe Journal, 1995.

remain polite and exhibit "ladylike" manners. Research on women and language suggests that linguistic bias affects women in two major ways: through the way they are taught to use language and through the way language represents them. Women frequently employ tag questions, qualifiers, and fillers to soften their speech, reflecting social expectations of deference and politeness. They also tend to avoid direct or confrontational expression, which reinforces their traditionally subordinate status. Despite progress toward gender equality, cultural norms continue to position male communication as the default standard. This bias has deep historical roots, evident in the views of influential thinkers. Aristotle described women as "imperfect men," while St. Thomas Aquinas argued that divine wisdom might have avoided creating them altogether. In the nineteenth century, phrenologists claimed that women's smaller skulls justified their lower social rank, and Freud asserted that women possessed a weaker sense of justice. These historical attitudes underscore the enduring association between language, gender, and power.

The legacy of male dominance in communication and society is indeed regrettable, yet it largely belongs to the past; the focus now turns to what the future holds. The answer, in many ways, lies within the influence of the media. Mass media serves as a powerful and pervasive force in shaping cultural perceptions, wielding the ability to define and reinforce social norms. Industries such as beauty, diet, and advertising act as modern myth-makers, constructing narratives that dictate cultural ideals and representations of gender. These sectors set the standards for what is considered authentic masculinity and femininity, delineating acceptable male and female behaviours. As we move further into the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a social landscape governed by both enduring traditions and evolving norms—an environment where codes of behaviour and communication continue to shape identity and interaction. Contemporary research increasingly demonstrates that gender-based differences in communication are not innate, nor are they rooted in biological distinctions between the sexes. Rather, they are products of social conditioning and cultural influence, reflecting the ever-changing dynamics of modern society. Our identities and modes of expression are deeply shaped by societal and cultural expectations. Although examining gender differences in language may seem straightforward, understanding the true nature of these distinctions proves to be a complex undertaking. One particularly significant question concerns why women tend to use more standard forms of

language than men. Linguists have suggested that this tendency may stem from women's heightened awareness of social status and their sensitivity to how speech reflects one's position within the community. Research has shown that women are often more attentive to the social implications of their linguistic choices. For instance, studies conducted in sociolinguistics revealed that women not only used more standard linguistic forms than men but also reported doing so even more frequently than they actually did. This pattern may reflect women's lower social status in many societies, prompting some to seek upward mobility or social recognition through the use of prestige speech forms. Women have traditionally been viewed as the guardians of a society's moral and cultural values. They are often entrusted with the responsibility of modelling appropriate behaviour within their communities, particularly in linguistic conduct. This perspective suggests that society expects women to adhere more closely to standard language norms than men, especially when they serve as linguistic role models for children. However, while this explanation may apply to certain social or cultural contexts, it is not universally valid. Interactions between mothers and children are typically casual and informal, and such relaxed settings often feature the use of vernacular speech by both adults and children alike. Another explanation for women's greater use of standard language forms centres on the relationship between language, power, and politeness. Those in subordinate social positions are often expected to display deference and restraint in their communication. Just as children are taught to speak respectfully to adults, women, historically positioned as a subordinate group, have been socially conditioned to avoid offending men. This dynamic has encouraged women to adopt more careful, polite, and socially acceptable speech patterns as a means of maintaining harmony and navigating social hierarchies. In *Gender and Politeness*, Mills[6] challenges the common assumption that women are inherently more polite than men.

Research premises

Freedom of conscience[7] represents one of the fundamental values of democratic societies, being associated with the individual's right to think, believe,

6 Sara Mills, *Gender and politeness*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

7 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Les Arsc, France, Editions IARSIC, 2016, pp.30-37.

and act according to their own moral and spiritual convictions. The way this topic is approached in public discourse or in everyday conversations reflects not only political or religious beliefs but also subtle differences in expression between genders. Linguistic and psychosocial research shows that language is not a simple neutral tool of communication, but a space in which identities, social roles, and positioning strategies are manifested. Thus, the central question becomes: do men and women speak differently about freedom of conscience? And if so, what do these differences tell us about the way gender shapes perceptions of inner freedom and moral authority?

Language as moral positioning

In the analysis of discourse on freedom of conscience, studies show that men tend to use more assertive and argumentative language, while women prefer a more reflective and relational register. This tendency aligns with Deborah Tannen's classic research[8], which describes communicative style differences between genders in terms of "report" and "relation": men often pursue status and clarity of position, whereas women emphasize cooperation and empathy. In the context of freedom of conscience, men more frequently use declarative statements, such as "everyone has the absolute right to believe what they want" or "the state has no right to intervene." These utterances convey certainty and personal autonomy. Women, on the other hand, often use modal formulations or hedging ("I think," "it seems to me that," "perhaps one should"), which temper an authoritative tone and create space for dialogue. This strategy does not indicate a lack of conviction but reflects a relational orientation of moral discourse—freedom is not just an individual right, but a state of balance between oneself and others.

Lexical and Thematic Differences

Lexical analyses show that, in discourse about conscience, men more frequently use terms associated with authority, reason, and moral order ("law," "principle," "truth," "justice"), whereas women tend to employ a vocabulary of care and empathy ("understanding," "respect," "compassion," "choice").

These differences align with the framework of Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2001), which distinguishes between an orientation toward

8 Deborah Tannen, *You just don`t understand, Women and men in conversation*, New York, William Morrow&Co, 1990, pp.330.

authority/order and an orientation toward care/egalitarianism. For example, in debated contexts, such as the right to refuse a religious practice, the moral education of children, or bioethical dilemmas, men tend to argue in terms of abstract principles, while women frame their arguments in terms of relationships and personal consequences. This reflects not only a style of language but also a cognitive difference in approaching morality: one is deductive, the other contextual.

Tone, Emotion, and Discursive Politeness

Another level of difference is emotional tone. Women more frequently express empathy and concern for the moral consequences on others, using affective structures ("it seems unfair to those who…," "it pains me to see that…"). Men adopt a more impersonal and rational tone ("it doesn't make sense to prohibit…," "this is a matter of rights"), maintaining emotional distance from the moral subject. A difference is also observed in politeness strategies: women often use mitigating formulas ("I hope I don't offend anyone," "I may be wrong, but I believe…"), whereas men formulate direct imperative or evaluative statements ("it must be respected," "it should not be allowed"). These stylistic nuances show how language constructs different moral identities: one based on relationship and understanding, the other on autonomy and justice.

Research Methodology

To identify whether the theoretical aspects presented above are to be found in real-life situations, we have analysed posts on social networks pertaining to both men and women. To protect the identity of those who posted, we won`t refer to them by their names, and only in terms of man or woman and sometimes, when we were able to identify their age, we provided information about this aspect. To better understand the differences in tone and linguistic structure between men and women, I analyzed a set of public social media posts (Facebook, X/Twitter, civic forums) on the topic of "freedom of conscience", mostly related to religion, moral education, and personal freedom.

I have analysed some examples that were posted on social media, as posts or comments to different post.

Assertive Language (Typically Masculine)

"Freedom of conscience does not mean moral chaos. If everyone does whatever they want, we no longer have a society. There are laws, there are principles that must be respected." (male user, 42 years old)

☐ Declarative structure, main clauses, normative tone ("must be respected").
☐ Use of the metaphor of order ("moral chaos") indicates a concern for stability.
☐ Abstract vocabulary: *principles, laws, society*.
☐ Absence of affective or politeness markers.
☐ High assertiveness, moral rationalization.

Reflective and Relational Language (Typically Feminine)

"For me, freedom of conscience means being able to choose without fear and without being judged. I think it's important that we listen to one another, even if we think differently." (female user, 35 years old)

☐ Empathic and inclusive tone ("we listen to one another").
☐ Moderate hedging ("I think it's important," "for me" – markers of subjectivity).
☐ Affective vocabulary: *fear, judged, listen*.
☐ Discursive empathy, orientation toward harmony.

Rationalized Moral Language (Masculine)

"The state must protect freedom of conscience even when we disagree with others' opinions. Otherwise, democracy makes no sense." (male user, 28 years old)

☐ Civic tone, oriented toward abstract principles ("the state,""democracy").
☐ Use of conditional logic ("otherwise, democracy makes no sense") – deductive reasoning.
☐ No personal or affective references.
☐ Normative civic discourse, deductive structure.

Contextual Moral Language (Feminine)

"I understand that everyone has the right to believe what they want, but sometimes it's hard not to feel hurt when people impose their beliefs on you. Freedom of conscience should also mean respect for others." (female user, 31 years old)

- ☐ Appeal to personal experience ("it's hard not to feel hurt").
- ☐ Appeal to moral balance ("and respect for others").
- ☐ Affective language + pragmatic orientation ("I understand that… but…").
- ☐ Situated moral discourse, based on experience and empathy.

Polemical a Language (Masculine)

"Those who talk about freedom of conscience use it as an excuse not to respect national values. Either you believe in something, or you don't believe at all." (male user, 50 years old)

- ☐ Maximal assertiveness ("either… or…" – binary, exclusionary structure).
- ☐ Polemical, defensive tone, oriented toward collective moral identity ("national values").
- ☐ Lack of nuance, presence of global judgments.
- ☐ Identitarian, normative, and exclusivist discourse.

Conciliatory and Nuanced Language (Feminine)

"I think freedom of conscience is a delicate matter. You can't impose what someone should believe, but neither can you ignore the traditions of a community. Balance is needed." (female user, 44 years old)

- ☐ Clear presence of hedging ("I think," "balance is needed").
- ☐ Balanced structure, free of absolutism.
- ☐ Conciliatory tone, seeking common ground between individual freedom and community respect.
- ☐ Moderate discourse, serving a moral mediation function.

Conclusions

The analysis of discourse patterns shows that men and women approach freedom of conscience through distinct linguistic and moral frameworks that mirror broader socialized differences in communication. Men tend to construct their arguments through assertive, principle-based, and normative language, emphasizing order, law, and rationality. Their discourse often employs declarative statements and impersonal tone, presenting moral issues as matters of universal truth or social stability. Women, on the other hand, articulate freedom of conscience through a relational and empathetic lens, emphasizing respect, balance, and emotional understanding.

Their language shows a higher frequency of modal expressions ("I think," "it seems,""for me") and affective vocabulary, reflecting an awareness of interpersonal dynamics. For them, conscience is not only a right but also a responsibility toward others, something that must coexist with empathy and mutual respect.

Rather than seeing these differences as oppositional, the findings point to a complementarity: masculine discourse stresses moral clarity and structure, while feminine discourse adds nuance and ethical sensitivity. Together, they enrich the public conversation about freedom of conscience, illustrating that genuine liberty emerges not from uniformity of expression, but from the dialogue between certainty and empathy.

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