Gender differences in sitcoms

Gašparec, Valeria

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2023

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:131:702690

Rights / Prava: In copyright/Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-14**

UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SITCOMS

Master Thesis

Valeria Gašparec

Advisor: Asst. Prof. Anđel Starčević, PhD

Zagreb, 2023

Abstract

This thesis analyses the speech of male and female characters in two popular sitcoms: *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) and *Modern Family* (2009-2020). The first seasons of both TV shows were chosen for this research, which consist of 54 episodes total: 30 episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and 24 episodes of *Modern Family.* The aims of this research are to investigate whether male and female characters use linguistic features associated with their particular gender, and whether the speech patterns have changed over the span of 40 years. The linguistic strategies investigated in this paper are the ones associated with both genders, such as hedges, turn-taking and interruptions, commands and directness, and taboo language. The research shows that there has been a change in gender differences in language over the years. The characters in *The Dick van Dyke Show* use language strategies that correspond to the traditional gender roles where women tend to use passive and indirect language, while avoiding interruptions and taboo language. Moreover, male characters are more likely to use linguistic strategies perceived as assertive, such as commands and interruptions. On the other hand, in *Modern Family* the difference in the use of language strategies was not found, as both male and female characters adopted the same linguistic strategies. In conclusion, the analysis of the two sitcoms shows that the gender differences in language subsided over the 40-year period, as characters of both genders employed various linguistic strategies.

Keywords: gender differences, women speech, male speech, sitcoms

Table of Contents

Introduction

The 21st century saw the public and the media taking an interest in various social issues. From the *Black Lives Matter* and *Me-too* movement to the raising concern about pay inequality, the media is filled with stories about the necessity for equal treatment. Gender as a topic has found its way into the public discourse. Recently in television and movies, the topic has gained traction with the rise of female led movies and TV series. As society strives for equal representation, a growing number of projects are driven by female directors, actresses, showrunners etc. Thus, the topic of gender and differences has continued to be a relevant one. The increased focus on the issue of gender has highlighted that modern society is still governed by gender stereotypes. Articles such as *Five Ways To Be Assertive At Work As A Woman* published by Forbes, and *How to Talk to a Man* published by Women's Health, show that the idea that women's language is somehow lacking is still present in the society. This is especially evident in movie reviews, as the most common criticism of the 2019 movie *Captain Marvel* was that the main character did not smile enough prompting a wide variety of articles such as *Not Even Captain Marvel is Safe from the 'smile more' catcall* by Vox and *Does Captain Marvel just need to smile more? Nope, says the film's creative team* by Los Angeles Time. Even four years later the issue of gender (in)equality has been the topic of movie reviews for the 2023 film *Barbie* where Barbies are shown occupying the positions of power with Kens being "just Kens". Hence, the continued coverage of gender issues in media continues to influence the public's perception. Whether it is through the news or entertainment, this coverage is continuing to grow. As the topic of gender differences occupies the mainstream media, it should be of no surprise that it has also occupied the academic world. Countless research has been written highlighting the differences between genders. In linguistics, gender differences were mostly neglected until the 1970s. Accordingly, after the 1970s gender differences in language have risen to one of the most prolific topics of sociolinguistic research. Today, gender differences are the subject of a growing number of linguistic papers.

In this paper we will take a look at the portrayal of gender differences in two American sitcoms: *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Modern Family.* The research will highlight how each sitcom has constructed gender roles through language use and how the gender roles have changed over the years.

Theoretical Framework

Language and Gender

Throughout the years gender differences between men and women is a topic which has captured the public interest. Whether you are watching an episode of *Friends* or reading movie reviews, the topic of gender is sure to come up. The various differences between genders have continued to be a prolific topic in today's media, with countless books, articles, movies, and TV series trying to capture as many differences as they can. This can be done for entertainment or to highlight social issues. Whatever the authors' purpose is, the media feeds into our perception of gender. Therefore, stereotypical ideas that women are prone to give compliments or gossip, while men will engage in taboo language are just some of the differences perpetuated by today's media. In other words, media contributes to existing and the creation of new ideologies.

Ideology is defined as "the system of beliefs by which people explain, account for, and justify their behavior, and interpret and assess that of others" (Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 23). Language ideology is a term "used to refer to the representations through which language is imbued with cultural meaning." (Cameron, 2014, p. 281). Therefore, ideologies can represent our attitudes towards language. Bloomaert (2005) notes that authors approach the question of ideology differently. Some authors consider ideology: "general, all-pervasive, and defining of a 'society' or a 'system', and there are authors who distinguish between several, group-specific ideologies." (p. 164) The most notable ideology is the "ideology of standardization" or "ideology of the standard language". According to Holmes (2012) a standard variety of a language is the "one which is written, and which has undergone some degree of regularization or codification (for example, in a grammar and a dictionary); it is recognized as a prestigious variety or code by a community, and it is used for H functions alongside a diversity of L varieties." (p. 78) Other common ideologies are gender ideologies. They are defined as a "set of beliefs that govern people's participation in the gender order, and by which they explain and justify that participation." (Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 23)

Since the topic of gender differences is such an appealing one in the public eye, it is surprising that it was not as prevalent in academic research until the 1970s. Early sociolinguistic research did not include gender as a social variable. Coates (2017, p.62) attributes this lack of research focused on gender to researchers being white, well-educated men who were more concerned with language differences according to social class, age, and ethnicity rather than

gender. throughout the years. Particularly, gender was seen by researchers as irrelevant, and if it did impact language, it was not perceived as pertinent enough for further research. Until the publication of *Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Lakoff, language use was considered the same in men and women. Lakoff's book paved the way for future studies of language and gender. In her book, Lakoff argued that gender differences in language are a result of unequal power dynamics between male and female speakers, with male speakers holding more power in a conversation. (as cited in Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 39) The acquired data "was based not on a systematic observation of language use, but on Lakoff's intuitions and impressions" (as cited in Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 38), and it presented women's language as a weakness. Thus, Lakoff concluded that women's language was deficient, in comparison to men's language. As Coates (2017, p. 63) notes, this idea is dated by modern standards, however, it has marked a shift in linguistic research.

To understand the differences in language according to gender, we first must distinguish between the terms *sex* and *gender*. According to Coates (2017) modern sociolinguistics distinguish between „sex [as] a biological term and gender, the term used to describe socially constructed categories based on sex." (p. 63) In other words, sex is something we are born with, while gender is something we do, or perform. This distinction has only recently found its way into linguistic research. According to Eckert and McConnell (2013, p.4), there are no biological predispositions as to why men perform one set of actions while women perform another. For example, if a woman puts on make-up and wears a dress, it does not mean she was born with the love of make-up and dresses, rather she is performing a feminine gender. In other words, her love of 'girly' things has been socially constructed throughout her life. (Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 8) However, there is not the one and only version of our gender performance. People perform their gender differently in different situations and as Coates (2013) puts it "we have all had experience of feeling like a different person when we are in different situations." (p. 50) This means that depending on the situation, our company, and our expected roles, we behave differently. Hence, if a woman is with her child, she may take on the role of a caring and gentle mother, while at work she might present herself as a strong, independent woman who will not be seen showing her emotions. (Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 9) The "dichotomy of male and female is the ground upon which we build selves from the moment of birth." (Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 7) While a child is still young, adults are the ones who perform a child's gender. Girls are usually dressed in pink, they play with dolls, and play 'house', while boys are dressed in blue and play with cars. Thus, societal expectations

on how to perform a gender correctly influence us through all aspects of our lives. This is also reflected in language. While describing how parents talk to their children, Eckert and McConnell (2013, p. 9) highlight that diminutives and inner state words are more common when to talking to girls, while direct and emphatic prohibitives are more common when talking to boys. Therefore, "Men and women are socially different in that society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behaviour patterns from them." (Trudgill, 2000, p.79) Early linguistic research into gender differences did not distinguish between the terms sex and gender and has attributed individual's linguistic and social behavior to their sex rather than socially constructed gender. (Coates, 2017, p. 63) At the turn of the 21st century, the topic of gender became increasingly popular. The idea that men or women speak a certain way just because of their biological sex has been rejected and the social and cultural differences have been recognized as important. In sociolinguistics, gender differences have evolved into a popular research topic. Also, according to Bergs (2012, p. 88), methodologically it is very easy to set up sociolinguistic research to study gender differences in language as all it is needed are participants of different genders. Still, research has mostly been focused on two genders, masculine and feminine.

The beginnings of research into gender differences in language were characterized by the focus on the analysis of mixed talk, specifically pronunciation and grammar, since researchers assumed that mixed talk was where gender appeared most relevant. (McElhinny, 2014, p. 49) Researchers, using the quantitative method "summarized [the results] in tables and histograms, which showed diagrammatically how male and female speakers differed in their use of certain sounds or grammatical forms." (Coates, 2017, p.63) The most notable analysis of gender differences in language using the quantitative method was done by Peter Trudgill, who discovered in his native city of Norwich that men would use pronunciations similar to local vernacular rather than Standard English. Similarly, Jenny Cheshire noticed that adolescent males were more likely to use non-standard forms as opposed to adolescent females. (Coates, 2017, p. 64) Their findings marked a turning point in researching gender and language as more and more researchers took on the topic.

In the 1980s sociolinguistic research turned to conversational strategies of male and female speakers such as: minimal responses, hedges, tag questions, commands and directives, swearing and taboo language, compliments and turn taking (Coates, 2017, p. 64). In this era of research focused on gender differences in language, many of the folk-linguistic beliefs were rejected. Contemporary research has continued the trend of a more thorough analysis of speech

and has branched into single sex interactions in informal talk. Moreover, researchers have begun to analyze male and female language separately rather than juxtaposing them. (Coates, 2017, p. 64) Holmes (2012, p. 173) emphasized the importance of studying gender specifically as: "it is worth noting that although gender generally interacts with other social factors, (…) there are cases where the gender of the speaker seems to be the most influential factor accounting for speech patterns." Although Holmes (2012) in her book is mainly concerned with the standard variety, her emphasis rings true to all angles of linguistic research. The separate analysis of men's and women's language, thus, led to "women's talk [being] seen as part of female subculture and celebrated, rather than being labelled as powerless" (Coates, 2017, p. 64). On the other hand, Coates (2017, p. 64) notes that the issue of men and masculinity has also become the subject of closer research. Furthermore, the role of language in construction of femininity and masculinity has been discovered, as Coates (2017, p. 64) writes: "female speakers mirror each other's contributions to talk, collaborate in the co-narration of stories and in general use language for mutual support", while male speakers connect with each other "through playful antagonisms, and this ties in with men's need to position themselves in relation to dominant models of masculinity." Moreover, Holmes (2012) adds that "women tend to use more of the standard forms than men do, while men use more of the vernacular forms than women do." (p. 163) While researchers have found differences in language based on gender, Schilling (2011, p. 218) adds that "not only is there no simple division between women's language use and men's, but even the division of people into two clearcut sex/gender groups is a drastic oversimplification." Thus, Shilling (2011) notes that the idea that there are separate women's and men's languages has not been corroborated by the decades of research. However, public perception of language differences does not align with scientific discoveries. Hence, Queen (2013) names two problems which arise from non-specialists analyzing data regarding gender differences in language: "First, many people hold a strong essentialist ideology concerning gender differentiation that makes apparent differences between men and women particularly salient and even expected. Second, many have a difficult time thinking of language in terms of structure as well as content and tend to focus primarily on the idea that languages are made up of words." (p. 373) Therefore, gender ideologies strongly govern public perception. While research has shown that the idea that women talk more than men is untrue (Coates, 2017, p. 64), public perception of the issue is still in line with gender stereotypes. Queen (2013, p. 373) also emphasizes that non-specialists lack a deeper understanding of language beyond just grammar and vocabulary. This makes them prone to believing in gender stereotypes without critical examination.

As previously stated, researchers studying language and gender approached the topic from different angles. Coates (2017, p. 65) describes four approaches to studying language and gender. The boundaries between the following approaches to studying language and gender are not fixed and can be intertwined. A researcher can be influenced by more than one, however, contemporary linguists keep in mind "that gender is not a static, add-on characteristic of speakers, but is something that is *accomplished* in talk every time we speak." (Coates, 2017, p. 66)

According to Coates (2017, p. 65), the first approach is the deficit approach which was used in the earliest studies, most notably by Lakoff in her book *Language and Women's Place*. Authors who used this approach tended to compare 'women's language' to the norms governing the male language. (as cited in Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 39) Hence, women's language appeared deficient compared to male language. This weakness was thought to be demonstrated "through such arguably "weak" linguistic features as hedges, tag questions, and indirect requests and commands." (Schilling, 2011, p. 220) Critics argue that the deficit approach suggests that there is "something intrinsically wrong with women's language, and that women should learn to speak like men if they wanted to be taken seriously." (Coates, 2017, p. 65) This approach is dismissed by linguists as outdated, however, it is still accepted by the general public.

Next, the dominance approach argues that there is a power dynamic between male and female speakers. In conversation, men hold more power which makes them dominant, while women are subordinate, which in turn makes them the oppressed group. (Coates, 2017, p. 65; Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 39) This dynamic of dominant male speakers and oppressed female speakers is sustained by all participants. Thus, the focus of research is to show the way this power inequality is manifested through language practices. (Coates, 2017, p. 65)

Thirdly, the difference approach is based on "the idea that women and men belong to different subcultures." (Coates, 2017, p. 65) Hence, the differences in language were seen as a result of "fundamental differences in their relation to their language, (…) due to different socialization and experiences early on." (Eckert and McConnell, 2013, p. 39) Linguists in the 1980s discovered that men and women are a part of different subcultures and therefore their languages should be examined in their own right. In other words, instead of juxtaposing men's and women's language, this approach highlights the benefits of each. (Eckert and McConnell, 2013, 39) Mainly, the research using the difference approach highlights "the strengths of linguistic strategies characteristic of women, and to celebrate women's ways of talking." (Coates, 2017, p. 66) The criticism of this approach arises when applied to mixed talk

conversation as it disregards the issue of power, as was done in Deborah Tannen's *You just don't understand*. (Coates, 2017, p. 66)

Lastly, there is the social constructivist approach. This is the most recent approach which highlights the difference between sex and gender. (Coates, 2017, p. 66) Researchers using the social constructivist approach claim that "gender identity is seen as a social construct rather than as a 'given' social category (…) speakers should be seen as 'doing gender' rather than statically 'being' a particular gender" (Coates, 2017, p. 66). Therefore, a person does not use conversational strategies just because of their biological sex, but because they are performing the chosen gender.

Influence of the media on language

In today's society, people are surrounded by various types of media. From television, online streaming services to social media, speakers of a certain language are constantly exposed to its influence. (Coombe and Davies, 2013, p. 206, Talbot, 2007, p. 4) As people interact with different kinds of media every day, its importance has been acknowledged by researchers making media discourse a multidisciplinary field. Coombe and Davies (2013) look at how gender differences in television programs from 1988 to 2008 portray employed mothers. In their paper, they put forward a notion that the traditional American version of gender ideology is based on the existence of two spheres: the public sphere, more suited for men; and the private sphere more suited for women. Moreover, they argue that "television programming tends to depict more traditional gendered roles, and that the industry presents this message constantly throughout its programming." (Coombe and Davies, 2013, p. 206)

Coombe and Davies (2013, p. 212), also argue that television programming is not representative of the real-world situation, rather it is created to attract the largest audience. If we look at the history of gender representation in sitcoms, we can see how they have reflected the public sentiment towards characteristics of each gender. Up until the 1980s only around 20 to 35 per cent of the total number of characters in a series were women. (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 45) Researchers in the 1970s found that the popular topics were marriage and parenthood. (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 47) Even today, sitcoms usually follow everyday lives of families with *Young Sheldon* (2017-), *Son of a Critch* (2022-), *Rick and Morty* (2013-) all implementing family dynamics into their plotlines.

The topic of the influence of media on language is a controversial topic within sociolinguistics. While a large number of linguists dismiss the influence of media on core systems of language, pronunciation, and grammar, speakers tend to believe "that watching television affects the way we speak." (Stuart-Smith, 2007, p. 140) The impact of television on language production has also been studied in young children and their increased exposure to various media. Pempek, Kirkorian & Anderson (2014, p. 214) researched the effects of background sounds on parents' speech and found that parents engage less in conversation with their children in the presence of background television. In their study, they conclude by noting that the presence of television negatively impacts language acquisition in children as "parent input is an important factor for language acquisition" (Pempek, Kirkorian & Anderson, 2014, p. 211). In analyzing the connection between non-native English speakers and the media, Vijayakumar et al. (2020, p. 2415) found that TV shows positively impact language acquisition while Stuart-Smith et al. (2013, p. 530) found that television, more specifically the television show *EastEnders* has impacted the rapid linguistic change of the Glaswegian vernacular. However, in sociolinguistics the problem arises from the fact that "so many people watch television, that the numerous and complex bundles of factors that television now represents can no longer be ignored." (Stuart-Smith, 2007, p. 142) Thus, the research into whether television impacts language production has given inconclusive results. Today, media discourse has also found itself being studied in linguistics, more specifically, conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis. (Talbot, 2007, p. 15)

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to investigate whether gender differences in speech patterns between male and female speakers have changed over the years. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- Do male and female characters exhibit linguistic features associated with their gender?
- Has the usage of male and female language in sitcoms changed over the years?

Methodology

Two TV shows that have been selected for the analysis are *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966) and *Modern Family* (2009-2020). The examples listed in the paper were collected

from the first seasons of both shows which consist of 54 episodes total: 30 episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and 24 episodes of *Modern Family*. The following 28 examples were chosen as relevant to the aim of this research. The examples were chosen based on relevancy, while the data was analyzed using the method of conversation analysis.

Results and Discussion

Hedges

Hedges in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*

(1) Rob: Please forget everything you learned today.

   Richie: But I learned some good ones.

   Laura: Darling, maybe we ought to do this after dinner. (*Season 1, Episode 20*)

(2) Laura: Well, let's try to do this without losing our tempers. (*Season 1, Episode 20*)

(3) Laura: I have just spent $28.37 for a bag full of potential leftovers.

   Rob: Don't worry about leftovers. I'll eat 'em for breakfast.

   Laura: I still think we overdid it. (*Season 1, Episode 29*)

In these three examples, hedges are used by Laura. In all three examples hedges are used to avoid saying directly what she thinks. In example (1) Laura uses a modal marker *maybe* to suggest that the conversation should be continued later. Example (2) again shows Laura using a hedge to avoid giving a command directly. In example (3), a hedge is used to avoid saying that there is too much food. Laura does not want to make a prediction that there are going to be leftovers. Although she implies her certainty, she labels leftovers as '*potential*'.

Hedges in *Modern Family*

(4) Mitchell: I don't know about this. Should I call a doctor?

   Claire: I-I-I-I think what Dad is trying to say... is that, Mitchell, you're a little uptight.
   (*Season 1, Episode 1*)

In this example from Episode 1, hedges are used by a female character. Claire uses hesitation and hedging *"I-I-I-I think what Dad is trying to say..."* to deliver the 'unpleasant' truth in a more

considerate way, trying to spare Mitchell's feelings. Moreover, by using a hedge, Claire is avoiding taking responsibility for the opinion that Mitchell is uptight, rather that stating it directly, while also characterizing him as "*a little uptight*", which downplays its value.

(5)   Claire: I have tried to make you feel comfortable with us.

        Gloria: You think it's all in my head?

        Claire: No. Kind- I don't know. I mean, we really love having you and Manny in our family. (*Season 1, Episode 5*)

In this example from episode 5, Claire is, also, the one who avoids being direct. While in the first example the character is using a hedge to avoid stating an opinion, this example shows hedges being used as a way of avoiding answering the question truthfully. Throughout the episode, Claire shows her disdain towards her father's new wife, Gloria. However, when confronted with the issue directly, Claire chooses avoidance.

On the other hand, male characters tend to use hedges primarily while asking questions:

(6)   Mitchell: So, anyway, mom really wants to smooth everything over with dad and Gloria, so I was thinking, would it be okay if she maybe joined us for dinner tonight? (*Season 1, Episode 4*)

(7)   Jay: Oh, and Gloria, if you want to get together with the girls later, I could just, you know, watch the football game or something. (*Season 1, Episode 5*)

In the first example, Mitchell uses hedges "*would it be okay if she maybe joined us for dinner tonight*" to ask his sister an unpleasant question. The use of hedges implies caution and allows the other speaker to deny the request. By using the phrase *"I was thinking…"*, Mitchell implies that the final decision has not been made. From the second example, it is apparent that that Jay's wish is to stay at home and watch football, rather than participating in the family gathering. As was the case with Mitchell's question to Claire, Jay does not express his wishes outright, but presents them in a way that is beneficial to Gloria, so she can have fun with the girls. Hence, these two examples show the use of hedges in mixed talk where male characters implement hedges to ask female characters for something indirectly. In other words, they leave the decision making to female characters so as to avoid responsibility. Lastly, we have an example of hedges in all male conversation.

(8)   Jay: Listen, Shorty, uh, we know each other a long time, right? What, 30 years?

Shorty: Yeah.

Jay: And, um, I sense that you got a secret... that's maybe causing you a lot of anguish.
(Season 1, Episode 13)

This example is an interaction between Jay and his friend Shorty on whether Shorty has been keeping his homosexuality a secret. So, Jay is trying to encourage his friend to confide in him. As in the previous two examples, hedges are used as a way of indirectly asking a question. As a heterosexual elder white male, the topic of one's sexuality is a taboo for Jay. Since this discussion is uncomfortable, Jay resorts to using hedges to ask a question indirectly and politely.

Turn-taking and Interruptions

Turn-taking and Interruptions in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*

(9)   Laura: Darling, I'm a woman, and--

Rob: So I've noticed.

Laura: What I mean is, if I leave the house tonight feeling the way I do, I just know something's gonna happen. It always does when I feel this way. Call it women's intuition--

Rob: You mean superstition.

Laura: No, it's not superstition. It's scientific. (*Season 1, Episode 1*)

We will first look at two examples of mixed talk conversation. The first example is an interaction between a husband and a wife. Here, Rob is interrupting his wife while she is voicing her concerns about their son being sick. By interrupting Laura, Rob is showing that he does not take her concerns seriously.

(10)   Sally: Buddy, you really like these?

Buddy: I really like 'em.

Sally: Yeah, but do you love 'em?

Buddy: Yeah, I love 'em.

Sally: Better than the alligators?

Buddy: Better than the alligators. (*Season 1, Episode 20*)

(11)   Buddy: Hey, d'y'ever see the collection Alan has? Oh, he must have over five hundred pipes in his den.

Rob: In his den? In his house?

Buddy: No, the den in his car. What kind of a question is that? (*Season 1, Episode 10*)

Secondly, we have an example of mixed talk conversation between two coworkers. This example does not have any interruptions, rather turn-taking is done one speaker at a time. The talk between the speakers of the same gender also allows speakers to talk one at a time. From the examples, we can see that interruptions are only present in mixed talk conversations where a man is interrupting. However, in interactions between co-workers there are no interruptions, and the floor is taken by one speaker at a time.

Turn-taking and Interruptions in *Modern Family*

(12)   Mitchell: So, we had initially asked one of our lesbian friends
to be a surrogate, but…
Cameron: …then we figured, they're already mean enough. Can you imagine
one of 'em pregnant? (*Season 1, Episode 1*)

Throughout the first season of Modern Family, characters of Cameron and Mitchell engage in playful banter, usually finishing each other's sentences. As it is seen from the example (12), speakers are still talking one-at-a-time without interruptions. However, Mitchell makes a conscious pause in his speech to allow Cameron to finish his sentence.

(13)   Mitchell: Right, exactly, s-

Cameron: Whether that's a painter, a poet, a pilot, a president-

Mitchell: And for us-

Cameron: -of a company or of a country.

Mitchell: …Patience. (*Season 1, Episode 2*)

In this example of interruption, Michell is trying to get a word in while Cameron is answering the question. Mitchell is attempting to interrupt Cameron, however that is done unsuccessfully. Hence, this example would not be classified as interruption, but an overlap.

(14)   Jay: You know, Gloria, that little blowup with that other mom- Why do you have to do things like that?

Gloria: If somebody says something about my family, I'm going to-

Jay: I'm just saying. You could take it down here a little bit. That's all. (*Season 1, Episode 1*)

Example (14) shows us a two-person mixed talk conversation. Here, Jay and Gloria are discussing her temperament. Jay is interrupting Gloria to stop her from getting more heated. As was the case with The Dick Van Dyke Show, a husband is interrupting his wife.

(15)   Hailey: Then I'm, like, "There's no way I'm wearing that." And she was, like-
Claire: Like.
Hailey: "Well, if you don't wear it, then you can't play." And then I was, like, "That's fine by me."
Claire: Honey, like.
Hailey: And then she was, like, "Well, if you don't play-"
Claire: Like! Like! (*Season 1, Episode 16*)

Lastly, in example 15, Claire is trying to interrupt her daughter as she is overusing the word 'like'. Therefore, the interruption is attempted solely to correct Hailey's speech.

Commands and Directness

Commands and Directness in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*

(16)   Laura: Well, then I think you should go. I mean it, honey. There's no sense in both our staying home. After all, you have a responsibility to your work, and I fully understand that.
Rob: You do?
Laura: Sure I do.
Rob: You don't mind if I go alone?

Laura: Not at all, darling. Well... It's just that I couldn't go to a party knowing my son was on the verge of being sick. I couldn't enjoy myself.

Rob: All right, all right, you win. (*Season 1, Episode 1*)

Here, Laura believes their son Richie is sick and believes they should not go to Rob's birthday party. We can see from the example that, rather than stating directly that they should stay home, she lets Rob know indirectly. Firstly, she seemingly gives her permission and understanding: "*After all, you have a responsibility to your work, and I fully understand that*." However, by saying: "*It's just that I couldn't go to a party knowing my son was on the verge of being sick. I couldn't enjoy myself.*", she indirectly expresses her wish and Rob seemingly goes along with it.

(17)   Rob: Now you promise me you won't say that word anymore.

Richie: Cause it's naughty?

Rob: That's right, it is. Do you promise?

Richie: I promise, Daddy, and I won't use it no more. *(Season 1, Episode 20)*

In example (17) we can see that the father figure, Rob, is the one who is disciplining his child. This is achieved through the use of a direct command "*you promise me you won't say that word anymore*".

Commands and Directness in *Modern Family*

(18)   Claire: Luke, Alex, why don't you take it outside, okay? (*Season 1, Episode 1*)

(19)   Claire: Honey, I thought you were gonna take out the garbage. (*Season 1, Episode 3*)

In these two examples, Claire is giving orders to Luke, and Phil. We can see that these commands are not directly stated. In the first example the command is stated as a question: "*why don't' you..*", while in the other it is stated by a hedge: "*I thought…*".

(20)   Gloria: Today you have to spend time with Luke.
Manny: Why?
Gloria: Because his mother invited you, so you go. (*Season 1, Episode 3*)

On the other hand, we can see from this example that the character of Gloria gives out commands more directly. In this interaction, she directly states what Manny has to do, play with Luke. Next, we are going to look at the way both Claire and Phil react in the same situation where it is necessary to give out a command.

(21)   Phil: One of the really standard rules of the road... is we want to keep a safe distance between us and the car in front. And that is not safe right there. Not safe. Right.

Claire: Merge. Merge! [Horn Honking] Merge! Merge! Merge!

Hailey: Stop it! You're freaking me out! *(Season 1, Episode 6)*

(22)   Phil: … but you still smoked and lied. That's really bad. Now help me grab the tree.

Claire: Phil. Phil, Alex, come on back. Starting December 26, you are grounded for a full week, and that includes New Year's Eve.

Alex: But, I was-

Claire: Yeah, non-negotiable. So- (*Season 1, Episode 10*)

When compared to each other, we can see that Claire is the one who is direct with her orders. In the first example, Phil is 'calmly' explaining to Hailey that she has to keep a safe distance while driving. In other words, by using the pronouns *we* and *us* he isn't openly telling Hailey to slow down and increase the distance between the two cars. Claire, on the other hand, uses an imperative in the first example: *"Merge. Merge!"* The second example also shows Claire as the one who will ground the kids, while Phil isn't interested in following through with his threats.

Taboo language
Taboo language in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*

(23)   Rob: What did he say?
Laura: Well, he said--he said--
Rob: Richie said that? (…) Oh, honey, are you sure he wasn't trying to say something else?
Laura: Oh, Rob. I'm sure. It was just as plain as could be. (Season 1 Episode 20)

(24)   Richie: Tommy said it was a jerky idea too.
Rob: Did he say "jerky?" (Season 1, Episode 20)

Examples (23) and (24) are both from an episode titled "*A Word of the Day*". The plot of the episode is that Richie said a 'bad' word at school. As the entire episode is devoted to the issue of a child saying a 'bad' word, we as the audience are convinced that this is a grave issue. Example (23) shows us a distressed Laura informing her husband about a 'bad' word their son had said. However, the audience does not hear Laura say the word, rather we are left with Rob's shocked reaction to deduce which word was uttered. In example (24) at the end of the episode, we hear the 'bad' word '*jerky*'. This time the word is said by both Richie and Rob, who are both male characters.

(25)   Richie: Where did I come from, Daddy?

Rob: Well, Ritch, that's kind of complicated. I don't think we have time to go into it right now.

Richie: When will we have the time?

Rob: Well, I don't know. (Season 1, Episode 15)

Finally, episode 15 is devoted to answering Richie's question: Where did he come from? From the interaction, we can see that Rob uses hedges to avoid the conversation. Using *well, 'I don't think…'* and *'I don't know'* Rob is trying his best to pull Richie's attention away from the subject. As talking about the details of making children and where exactly children come from is a taboo topic, Rob is visibly uncomfortable with Richie's innocent question. Moreover, in the episode Rob handles the question by telling the story leading up to Richie's birth, leaving out the rest of the details.

Taboo language in *Modern Family*

(26)   Alex: The little bitch shot me.
Phil: [Chuckles]
Claire: Language! (*Season 1, Episode 1*)

In this example, Alex the middle child uses a derogatory word 'bitch'. In this example we can see two ways in which this utterance would be considered inappropriate. Firstly, Alex is still a child, in the first season of the series Alex is 11 years old. It is considered inappropriate for children to use swear words. Also, Alex is a girl. As noted earlier, girls are expected to be polite, which swearing is not. Therefore, in the first episode of the series there is an instance of taboo

language. What's also interesting is the reaction of the parents. While Phil ignores his daughter's 'bad' language and finds the entire situation amusing, Claire is the one who scolds her daughter. This reinforces the idea that not only women shouldn't swear but also, they are the ones who take on the role of enforcing the household rules, with men taking their role as a parent less seriously.

(27)   Alex: When my mom says I can ask her anything, I really can't. She just freaks out.
        Gloria: I won't freak out. Shoot.
        Alex: Okay. How many men have you slept with?
        Gloria: Eight. Next. (*Season 1, Episode 3*)

This example represents the way taboo topics are dealt with in the series. The purpose of this interaction between Alex and Gloria is for Alex to trust Gloria enough to confide in her. Alex tests her by asking about a topic considered a taboo: the number of people one has slept with. This topic is not only considered a taboo in the media but also, in real life. While this topic might arise in the conversation between close friends, it is believed to be inappropriate to discuss with strangers, and especially with children. As seen in the example, Gloria readily answers the question implying that she is not like her mum, that she won't *freak out*.

(28)   Jay: What the hell? Oh! [Crossbow Fires] Oh, crap! (*Season 1, Episode 7*)

 Here is another instance of using bad language: 'hell' and 'crap'. While these examples might be considered a tame, they are still considered swear words by some. Jay is swearing in emotional moments of surprise and pain as the arrow shoots him. Also, Jay is swearing in all-male company with no female characters present.

Discussion
Hedges

        Hedges are linguistic devices used for "dampening down the force of what we say." (Coates, 2013, p. 31) In other words, hedges are used to avoid giving a concrete answer or to keep the options open. They can take a wide range of linguistic forms such as: modal auxiliaries (*may, might, could, would ...*), modal adverbs (*probably, maybe, possibly ...*), and even discourse markers such as *'I think' and 'I mean'*. Hedges can have multiple uses. For example, hedges can be used to express doubt and the lack of confidence, to be sensible of the feelings of others', to search for the right word, and to avoid playing the expert. Hedges are usually

connected with women's language and are considered 'weak' as their main characteristic is avoidance. (Coates, 2013, p. 31)

While there were not many examples of hedges in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, all of the examples were uttered by female characters, more specifically Laura. Laura is a model for the perfect American housewife of the sixties. She is there for her husband and child, she is presented as caring, nurturing and polite. Therefore, the use of hedges allows her to distance herself from any real decision. On the other hand, in *Modern Family*, hedges are still primarily used by female characters not only to avoid being direct, but also to spare the feelings of others. However, hedges are not exclusively used by female characters. In mixed talk male characters use hedges to ask questions which might provoke an emotional reaction, as well as to indirectly say what they want. Lastly, in all male conversation hedges are used to approach topics deemed as sensitive or uncomfortable. Thus, the results have shown a noticeable difference in the usage of hedges in sitcoms from the 1960s until the 2000s. While in the sitcom of the 1960s hedges were used exclusively by female characters, in the 2000s their usage has spread to male characters as well. Therefore, the results have shown that hedges are no longer a characteristic of women's language and are employed by men in both single gender interactions as well as mixed talk.

Turn-taking and Interruptions

Turn-taking and interruptions as conversational strategies are extensively used in research of language and gender differences. As the beginnings of research into gender differences focused on mixed talk, turn-taking and interruptions offered a look into the organization of conversation.

In *The Dick Van Dyke Show* speakers occupy a single floor which is defined as when "one speaker speaks at a time" (Coates, 2013, p. 128). In both the instances of mixed talk and single sex talk the speakers occupy the conversational floor one-at-a-time. This makes the interactions easy to follow and understand. Even when there are interruptions, as was the case with the interaction between Laura and Rob, speakers occupy a single floor, there is no overlap between the speakers. Organization of the conversation as one speaker at a time follows the assumption made by linguists in early stages of research which states, "that all conversation follows the one-at-a-time turn-taking model described in the article 'A Simplest Systematics for the Organisation of Turn Taking in Conversation' by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and

Gail Jefferson" (Coates, 2013, p. 128). On the other hand, looking at the interruptions in the series, it is apparent that interruption has been done by a male speaker during a mixed talk conversation. Also, there were not any examples of interruption in mixed talk conversation done by women in the first season of the series. Therefore, interruption reinforces the power dynamic between genders, with male speakers holding more power in the conversation as opposed to the female speakers, in line with Coates, 2013, p.128.

While in *Modern Family* conversation is still mostly structured as one-at-a-time, there are more instances of interruptions, overlap and collaborative floor, in both single and mixed talk conversation. As was the case in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, in mixed talk conversation male characters are more likely to interrupt female characters. This also plays into the power dynamics between genders, as it implies that men are still holding more power in the conversation. In all female conversation Coates (2013, p.128) notes that collaborative floor is the most common way of organizing conversation. Collaborative floor is defined by Coates (2013, p. 128) as "the floor is potentially open to all participants simultaneously." Interruptions between all female speakers are mostly done in the interaction between a parental figure and a child. As speakers do not old the same power in the conversation, with the parent being more powerful, interruptions can occur. However, we can see a difference in the all-male conversation between Cameron and Michell, the openly homosexual couple. Their conversation does not follow the characteristic of male conversation where each speaker occupies the floor one-at-a-time. Rather they engage in collaborative floor especially in the interviews. Coates (2013, 137) has found in her research that women are more likely to engage in this kind of conversation. She also writes that: "the joint expression of shared ideas takes precedence over the individual voice." (Coates, 2013, p.137), which was demonstrated in the examples from the series.

Thus, both in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Modern Family*, speakers mostly occupy a single floor. Also, interruptions are done by the speaker who holds more power in the conversation. On the other hand, *Modern Family* there are more instances of collaborative floor, which is defined as a characteristic of all-female conversation. However, the first season of the series demonstrates the use of collaborative floor in all-male interactions, especially between Cameron and Mitchell.

Commands and Directness

Previous research into the topic of commands and directness has shown that men tend to hold more power in the conversation, and therefore, tend to be more direct and are more likely to use commands. (Dolinska & Dolinski, 2006; Eagly, 1983; Eagly and Wood, 1982; Falbo, 1977; Falbo and Peplau, 1980). *The Dick Van Dyke Show* confirms previous research on the topic. Rob, the father figure, is the one who disciplines their child, while Laura is the one who expresses her commands in an indirect way. Rob shows directness while disciplining, but he opts out of yelling and giving out explicit commands as he chooses a calmer approach. As stressed by Bernicot & Laval (2004, p. 208), promises are integral to parent-child relationships.

Modern Family, follows the example of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, with the character of Claire being indirect with her commands and Phil using expressing commands more gently. However, the results are not conclusive. As seen with the characters of Gloria and Claire, mothers are the ones who are charged with raising and disciplining the children commands and are considered 'strict'. While fathers, especially Phil, are portrayed as not following through with their threats.

Taboo Language

The research into gender differences in using language use points to men being more likely to talk about taboo topics and use language considered as taboo, while women would be more polite. (Hadian, 2015, p. 3, Coates, 2013, p. 153) Taboos are defined as "proscriptions of behaviour arising out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it is perceived to be a potential cause of discomfort, harm or injury" (Allen, 2018, p. 2). In language, taboos usually encompass swear words and topics such as sexuality and death. (Allen, 2018, p. 6).

The Dick Van Dyke Show does not shy away from talking about taboo topics as it dedicated two episodes to Richie saying a bad word, and Richie asking how he came into the world. However, the topics are not addressed directly, bad words are not explicitly uttered, and taboo topics such as where do children come from are transformed into lighthearted stories which don not include the answer to the question.

During its run, *Modern Family* dealt with family dynamics not usually represented on TV. Most notably the inclusion of Cam and Mitchell, who are an openly gay heterosexual couple who adopt a baby. However, as the sitcom was shown on network television it had to abide by

the rules of their censors. In the first season of the *Modern Family*, examples of taboo language are scarce, but present. As a TV series with the word *modern* in the title it does shows some leniency with using 'bad' words and topics which would be considered as a taboo, especially with children. This confirms De Klerk's (1992) study in which she found that while women tend to use more standard forms, there is a development towards freedom of speech. Fägersten, & Bednarek (2022) have also found that swear words in catchphrases have increased over the years. This can also be seen in the comparison of the two shows, as in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* taboo topics were addressed but not explicitly stated, while in *Modern Family* taboo topics are discussed in front of children, and swear words are used more freely.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed gender differences in language use in TV shows from the 1960s until the late 2000s. The results of this research have provided some valuable information into the gender differences in language as represented in the first seasons of the television shows *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Modern Family*. However, as only the first seasons of both shows were chosen for the analysis the results are not representative of gender differences in language throughout all seasons of the series. The following conclusions have been drawn from the analysis. In *The Dick Van Dyke Show* language strategies used by male and female characters adhere to traditional gender roles as women are portrayed as passive, indirect, and less likely to interrupt and use taboo language. This can be attributed to the time period, as in the beginning of the decade women were still considered as being part of the private sphere and were not an active a part of the workforce. Also, the findings correspond to the belief that 'women's language' is weak and lacking. On the other hand, in *Modern Family* there are no clear differences in the language strategies used by the characters. Both male and female characters are shown to adopt the same linguistic strategies. Thus, the results of this research correspond to results of the previous research done on the topic.

In conclusion, this research paper demonstrates that over the years gender differences in language have diminished in sitcoms. Female characters have taken on the strategies previously used only by male characters. Therefore, female characters have been portrayed as more direct, assertive, and not shying away from giving out commands and discussing taboo topics. Moreover, in male characters the increase in the use of hedges and indirectness has been observed. However, this study covers only the first seasons of the TV shows. Due to this fact,

the results cannot be generalized to represent the entire series, which can be viewed as a shortcoming of this study. Further research including TV shows airing in the 2020s could highlight if further change in gender differences in language has occurred.

Works Cited

Allen, K. (2018). Taboo words and language: an overview. In K. Allen, *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language* (pp. 1-29). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bergs, A. (2012). The Uniformitarian Principle and the Risk of Anachronisms in Language and Social History. In J. Hernández-Campoy, & J. Conde-Silvestre, *The Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics* (pp. 80-98). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Bernicot, J., & Laval, V. (2004). Speech Acts in Children: The Example of Promises. In I. Noveck, & D. Sperber, *Experimental Pragmatics. Palgrave Studies in Pragmatics, Language and Cognition* (pp. 207–227). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bloomaert, J. (2005). *Discourse.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cameron, D. (2014). Gender and Language Ideologies. In S. Ehrlich, M. Mayerhoff, & J. Holmes, *The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality Second edition* (pp. 281-296). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Coates, J. (2013). *Women, Men and Everyday Talk.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Coates, J. (2017). Gender. In C. Llamas, L. Mullany, & P. Stockwell, *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics* (pp. 62-68). New York: Routledge.

Coombe, J., & Davies, S. (2013). Gender Differences in the Influence of Television on Gender Ideology. *International Review of Modern Sociology Volume 39, Number 2*, pp. 205-223.

De Klerk, V. (1992). How taboo are taboo words for girls? *Language in Society, 21(2)*, pp. 277-289.

Dolinska, B., & Dolinski, D. (2006). To command or to ask? Gender and effectiveness of "tough" vs "soft" compliance-gaining strategies. *Social Influence*, pp. 48-57.

Eagly, A. (1983). Gender and social influence: A social psychological analysis. *American Psychologist, 38(9)*, pp. 971–981.

Eagly, A., & Wood, W. (1982). Inferred sex differences in status as a determinant of gender stereotypes about social influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 43(5)*, pp. 915–928.

Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2013). *Language and Gender Second Edition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Falbo, T. (1977). Multidimensional scaling of power strategies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35(8)*, pp. 537–547.

Falbo, T., & Peplau, L. (1980). Power strategies in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 38 (10)*, pp. 618-628.

Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Hadian, B. (2015). The Effect of Gender Speaking on the Use of Taboos. *Conference: the 12th international tellsi conference.*

Holmes, J. (2012). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics.* Harlow: Pearson Longman.

McElhinny, B. (2014). Theorizing Gender in Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology. In S. Ehrlich, M. Mayerhoff, & J. Holmes, *The Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality Second Edition* (pp. 48-67). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pempek, T., Kirkorian, H., & Anderson, D. (2014). The Effects of Background Television on the Quantity and Quality of Child-Directed Speech by Parents. *Journal of Children and Media*, pp. 211-222 .

Queen, R. (2013). Gender, Sex, Sexuality, and Sexual Identities. In J. Chambers, & N. Schilling, *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change* (pp. 368-387). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Schilling, N. (2011). Language, Gender and Sexuality. In R. Mesthrie, *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (pp. 218-237). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stuart-Smith, J. (2007). The Influence of the Media. In C. Llamas, L. Mullany, & P. Stockwell, *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics* (pp. 140-148). New York: Routledge.

Stuart-Smith, J., Timmins, C., Pryce, G., & Gunter, B. (2013). Television can also be a factor in language change: Evidence. *Language, Volume 89, Number 3*, pp. 501-536.

Talbot, M. (2007). *Media Discourse: Representation and Interaction.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics.* London: Penguin Books.

Vijayakumar, M., Baisel, A., Subha, S., & Abirami, K. (2020). Impact of TV Shows on English Language. *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering, Volume 8 Issue 5*, pp. 2414-2416.