Original Paper

Gender Differences in the Use of Tag Questions in English

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether there are any gender related differences in the use of language by television hosts in American talk shows. It brings a concise overview of gender differences manifested in language usage through different theoretical approaches offered by Otto Jespersen, Labov, Lakoff, Zimmerman and West, Tannen, Coates, Holmes and Cameron, as well as short descriptions of the studies they conducted. The present study analyses the frequency and the most common types of tag questions used by female and male television hosts in American talk shows. Talk shows are one of the most popular and influential forms of television programming that have an effect on society in different ways. They are aired in countries all over the world and there seem to be an amazingly endless number of relevant topics, thus offering interesting corpora for various types of linguistic analysis. The aim of the paper is to investigate whether there are any significant differences between male and female hosts in their use of tag questions.

Keywords

tag questions, gender, talk show, host

1. Introduction

Differences between men and women regarding language usage have inspired numerous researchers to conduct analysis of various corpora in order to obtain relevant results on the gender-based language differences. According to Talbot (2010) language varies depending on circumstances in which it is spoken and written and it depends on where, why, when, how and who by it is used, with the emphasis on the interdisciplinary nature of the study of language and gender. The questions to what extent a typical woman's language and a typical man's language are different and what are the most striking differences between them are the basis of most gender related linguistic studies. Talbot (2010) points

out that language simply reflects society and gender-related divisions are reflected in patterns of language use. There is a wide range of language related issues: the expectations of the use of language by women and men in everyday conversations, language among couples and friends, women in public speech and women's language in mass media. The topic of language and gender is a vibrant field of research. Researchers have studied the differences in pronunciation, the use of dialects and more prestigious forms of language, acquisition of new vocabulary and foreign language, the use of tag questions, hedges and boosters, euphemisms, "empty adjectives", frequency of interruptions made by women and men, differences in giving compliments and apologizing and the use of grammar and polite forms. The differences between the language of women and men have been analysed from different aspects and using different methodologies. The main focus of our research is the way American talk show hosts use tag questions as one of the linguistic strategies to approach the guest. The authors concentrate particularly on the frequency of occurrence and purpose of tag questions regarding gender differences and they answer the research questions through comparative analysis.

2. Language and Gender

Back in 1922, according to Danish linguist Otto Jespersen women talk more but often break off without finishing the sentences because they start talking without knowing what they are going to say. At that time linguists were making claims without particular data, which simply reflected the patriarchal society of that time. Jespersen (1922) describes "women's language as "lively chatter" with a lot of adjectives such as pretty, wonderful, so nice. According to Jespersen, women have smaller vocabulary but they are more fluent than men. The author also points out that novels written by women are easier to read due to simpler terminology and expressions. The author claims that women are better at acquiring foreign languages, but men are better at translating a difficult text. The studies on language and gender have continued throughout the years. Labov (1966) based his research on variationist sociolinguistics or variation theory, where he examined the usage of prestigious forms of language in different social classes. Labov claims that women in all social classes use more prestigious forms of language than men. A lot of research on this topic was conducted in the 1970s when women were seeking equality and it was the time of women's movements and early feminism. The main approach to research of that time was the Deficit Approach, a belief that the language used by women is inferior to the one used by men and "women's language" is deficient. Lakoff (1975), one of the most significant figures of the Deficit Approach, believed that the patriarchal society we lived in manifested in conversation as well. Lakoff claims that women use certain features of women's language and they include hedges (*sort of, kind of…*), intensifiers (*so...*), tag questions, rising intonation, empty adjectives (*wonderful, fantastic…*), precise colour terms (*ecru, beige, aquamarine*), hypercorrect grammar in all situations, super-polite forms (*would you mind?...*), avoidance, and emphatic stress. Women speak more quietly than men, they use minimal responses and more euphemisms. From her perspective, women use language that is powerless. The work of Robin Lakoff in the 1970s is used as the basis of much

25

research in the upcoming years.

Another approach in the field of language and gender is the Dominance Approach which is based on the belief that men are superior and dominate conversations due to their hierarchical dominance in society in general. Zimmerman and West (1975) based their research on this approach. Their findings show that the majority of interruptions in mixed gender conversations are caused by men. According to Zimmerman and West, men speak more, interrupt more and have longer turns in conversation. In the 1980s they are criticized by Geoffrey Beattie. From the perspective of Beattie (1982), Zimmerman and West used a rather small sample and they did not have enough data to draw the precise conclusion. Beattie (1982) conducted the same research and his findings show no significant differences in interruptions related to gender. Spender (1980), a radical feminist whose findings were based on the Dominance Approach, points out the male power in society and sees the male language as the norm. According to Spender (1980), language is under control of men: 'It is because males have had power that they have been in a position to construct the myth of male superiority and to have it accepted; because they have had power they have been able to "arrange" the evidence so that it can be seen to substantiate the myth. The myth was made a long time ago and for centuries it has been fostered by women and men so that now it is deeply embedded in virtually every aspect of our existence.'

Tannen (1990) argues that mixed gender conversation can be seen as a form of miscommunication, and female and male conversation can be different due to cultural differences between women and men that can be traced in childhood. This is the basis of the third, Difference Approach. Tannen lists six main differences of the way women and men speak: status vs. support, independence vs. intimacy, advice vs. understanding, information vs. feelings, orders vs. proposals and conflict vs. compromise. Holmes (1995) gives an overview of gender differences in the use of linguistic politeness. Women are generally believed to be polite than men. Holmes focuses on hedges, tag questions, compliments and apologies as tools used to express politeness verbally. Coates (1996) finds the cause of gender differences in language in childhood due to tendency to belong to a same-sex friendship groups and behave as boys and girls should "behave". Therefore, girls and boys develop different styles of speaking. Girls create more emotional and close relationships, while boys search for a position of dominance and try to maintain an audience. Pilkington (1998) also finds that women are very collaborative in same-sex conversations and they use positive politeness strategies while men are less collaborative and supportive.

Cameron (2008) claims that the idea that men and women use language in very different ways is one of the great myths of our time. According to her, gender is a matter of social roles and identities and they are more flexible than sex, which is a matter of chromosomes and reproductive organs and does not vary across cultures and through time. From her perspective gender cannot be connected to language as an isolated unit, but only in interaction with other aspects like age, ethnicity, social status and similar. Cameron's work represents the Diversity Approach as she emphasises individual differences of women and men. Cameron concentrates on how women use language within a particular group.

2.1 Tag Questions and Gender

Previous studies indicate the purpose of tag questions as well as gender-based differences. One of the first researchers on this topic is Lakoff (1975), who focused on the differences in linguistic behaviour of women and men with particular regard to tag questions. She defines tag question as a declarative statement without the assumption that the statement is to be believed by the addressee. According to the author, tag questions give the addressee some options and do not force the addressee to go along with the views of the speaker. The falling intonation (downtoning) shows lack of confidence of the speaker (*The way prices are rising these days is horrendous, isn't it?*). The author associates tag questions with a desire for confirmation or approval which signals a lack of self-confidence in the speaker. In her opinion women have a deficient position in society and therefore use deficient language. It is important to point out that Lakoff did not use any particular data for analysis. All her findings are based on her own speech and the speech of her friends and language used in the media. She claims that women use question tags more frequently due to their powerlessness and need for approval and affirmation.

Dunn (1988) analysed tag questions used in conversation between female friends in an informal interaction while going through a magazine. She found both, referential and affective kinds of tag questions and concluded that ir is obviously a characteristic of friendly interaction between women.

Holmes (1984) distinguishes two basic kinds of tag questions: referential (with rising intonation at the end), and affective tag questions (with falling intonation at the end). Referential tags request confirmation or information about the statement of which the speaker is uncertain (*You have been doing that for a longer time, haven't you?*) We might end a sentence with a referential tag question if we need to check the accuracy of the statement. There are two kinds of affective tag questions: the facilitative tag used to express solidarity or closeness (*It's about your back, isn't it?*) and the softening tag used to soften the statement (*This was funny, wasn't it*?). After examining samples of talk in educational settings, the author finds that men use more referential type of tags than women. Women are those who use facilitative tags more. She supports the view that women focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do. According to the author, women usually show more solidarity than men, and are stylistically more flexible than men. In 1995 Holmes elaborates further on her classification, so in terms of politeness distinguishes four different functions of tag questions. Epistemic modal tags (*Today is his birthday, isn't it?*) express uncertainty about the content and they are not used as politeness devices. Challenging tags (*I'm the boss, okay?*) are seeking a response and cannot be used to express politeness. Facilitative tags (*You like that song, don't you?*) serve as politeness devices and they have affective function. Softening tags (*It wasn't such a great idea, wasn't it?*) are used as negative politeness devices and to soften the criticism. Findings of the author show that men use more epistemic modal tags than women. Challenging tags are found only in men's talk since they show the status of men. Women use more facilitative tags to express solidarity and care for other people's feelings. Surprisingly, in this research softening tags are used more by men than women.

Elvheim (2006) analysed different aspects of language used in two popular daytime talk shows: The

Oprah Show and The Dr Phil Show, aired all over the world. The author discusses the importance of certain linguistic strategies used to approach the guests. The main focus of her research is on the gender perspective. Elvheim investigates if the hosts of the talk shows can be labelled as typical female and male speakers. The author particularly focused on tag questions as an important part of the speech. Other than just observing the frequency of tag questions in talk shows, Elvheim based her analyses of tag questions on Lakoff's suggestion that women tend to use tag questions more frequently than men. Prior to analysing her transcriptions, the author's hypothesis was that she would find many tag questions in both Oprah's and Dr Phil's language. However, the results obtained show only three distinctive tag questions in two Oprah Shows: epistemic modal tags, challenging and facilitative tags. More tags were found in the episodes of Dr Phil, probably due to the issues dealt with and psychological strategy used to approach the guests. He used fifteen distinctive tag questions in two shows. It appears that the author's findings did not support her initial hypothesis stating that women tend to use tag questions more frequently than men. This research also shows that tag questions were not used as frequently as she thought they would be used.

3. The Study

3.1 Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine types and frequency of tag questions used by the talk show hosts Ellen DeGeneres and David Letterman. The present study attempts to investigate whether there are any differences between women and men in their use of tag questions. The following research questions are of particular interest:

1)   What is the frequency of the tag questions used by the American talk show hosts?

2)   What is the purpose of tag questions used by the two talk show hosts?

3)   Is there a significant difference in the frequency of usage of tag questions with regard to the gender of the hosts?

The paper was designed to answer the above-mentioned research questions and the findings will show if the following initial hypothesis are supported:

H1: The talk show hosts are expected to use tag questions frequently in each episode.

H2: The hosts use tag questions mainly to facilitate conversation.

H3: Female hosts are expected to use slightly more tag questions than male hosts.

4. Methodology

4.1 Corpus and Procedure

The study was carried out on a sample of ten episodes of the two popular American TV talk shows *Late Night Show with David Letterman* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (five episodes of each talk show). All tag questions that occurred during the shows were noted down while watching the episodes. *Late Night Show with David Letterman* is a one hour talk show aired in the evening, four nights a week. The

28

show featured several guests each night and it is rather unpredictable. The show was awarded for outstanding writing in variety, comedy or music program and it got five Emmy Awards. *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* is a one-hour daytime talk show, aired five times a week. The show combines different elements: comedy, celebrity interviews, with constant interaction with the audience. It has won thirty-six Emmy Awards. All ten episodes of the talk shows were recorded and all tag questions were noted down during the shows in order to get the total number. Tag questions that occurred in the shows are classified according to the classification made by Holmes (1984) who distinguishes referential tag questions expressing uncertainty and affective tags softening or facilitating the conversation.

4.2 Results and Discussion

Table 1. Total Number and Purpose of Tag Questions

	Ellen DeGeneres	**David Letterman**
Referential tag questions (expressing uncertainty)	13 (45%)	14 (44%)
Affective tag questions (softening or facilitating conversation)	16 (55%)	18 (56%)
Total tag questions	29	32

Table 1 presents the figures regarding the frequency and the purpose of tag questions in hosts' oral production.

In order to answer the first research question about the occurrence and frequency of tag questions used by the hosts in ten episodes of TV talk shows, all tag questions noted down were counted separately for each show. As seen from the figures in Table 1, tag questions occurred twenty-nine times during the episodes of The Ellen DeGeneres Show and thirty-two during the Late Night Show with David Letterman.

The first hypothesis was not completely supported. More tag questions were expected to be used during the shows due to a wide range of issues discussed and the need to facilitate the conversation with some of the guests.

As far as the purpose of the tag questions used in the talk shows is concerned, the tag questions were analysed in the context and categorized according to the classification given by Holmes (1984): referential (expressing uncertainty) and affective tag questions (softening and facilitating the

conversation). The second hypothesis is supported by the findings. The results show that tag questions were mostly used to facilitate and soften the interaction and to manage the flow of conversation:

*Things are great, **aren't they**?, This is a nice feeling, **isn't it**?, You are never really out of shape, **are you**?, That's interesting, **isn't it**?, It doesn't really mean anything, **does it**?, That's a lot of work, **isn't it**?, That was a big cultural movement, wasn't it?, It's a great way of thinking, **isn't it**?, It was a pleasant morning, **wasn't it**?, You don't think that's funny, **do you**?, It's a beautiful view, **isn't it**?, You will come back, **won't you**?, His films are great, **aren't they**?, He is away, **isn't he**?, You are not surprised, **are you**?, All in all, it was good for you, **wasn't it**?, But you understood the question, **didn't you**?, This is not what you meant, **is it**?*

Referential tag questions were used little less than affective tags:

*It ended up the wrong way, **didn't it**?, You are not in trouble, **are you**?, It's gone, **isn't it**?, She's got a curfew, **doesn't she**? You will be present at the awards, **won't you**?, You explained everything to them, **didn't you**?, You will bring it next time, **will you**?, You said the truth, **didn't you**? They both knew about that, **did they**?, She will perform again, **won't she**?, You didn't mean that, **did you**?, You'll write a book about you, **won't you**?, You like it here, **don't you**?, We are going to apologize, **are we**?, This will work, **won't it**?, You never come on time, **do you**?, Nothing will happen, **will it**?, You have to ask that, **don't you**?, You don't know the song, **do you**?, You knew the way, **didn't you**?, They gave you the address, **did they**?, You are making a lot of money, you are, **right**?*

The difference of the percentage between the usage of modal and affective tag questions is insignificant.

The number of total tag questions used by both hosts is compared in order to give the answer to the third hypothesis regarding the gender differences. Although men are usually thought to be ready to discuss all issues and women are considered to be more open to compromises and ready to soften the conversations, thus use more tag questions, the findings of this study show no significant difference between the male and the female hosts in the frequency of usage of tag questions. The host David Letterman even used slightly more tag questions than the host Ellen DeGeneres. In the *Late Night Show with David Letterman* most tag questions were used while speaking with the politicians due to certain serious matters that were discussed (*You had a Republican lift you, didn't you?, They did show the documents, did they?, That was all for the purpose of campaign, wasn't it?*).

Table 2. Tag Questions Occurred in Each Episode

Episodes	Ellen DeGeneres		David Letterman	
	Referential tags	Affective tags	Referential tags	Affective tags
1	1 (8%)	3 (18%)	2 (14%)	3 (17%)
2	3 (23%)	2 (13%)	2 (14%)	8 (44%)

3	2 (15%)	5 (31%)	4 (29%)	2 (11%)
4	5 (39%)	2 (13%)	4 (29%)	4 (22%)
5	2 (15%)	4 (25%)	2 (14%)	1 (6%)
Total	13	16	14	18

Table 2 shows the results based on the analysis of the tag questions that occurred in each episode. As it can be seen from the results in Table 2, both hosts used tag questions in all episodes. The host David Letterman used significantly more tags in only one of the episodes (44%).

5. Conclusion

When it comes to language and using particular linguistic strategies, researches have focused on gender-based differences (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1984; Elvheim, 2006). Based on the findings of this study it can be concluded that both hosts, David Letterman and Ellen DeGeneres used tag questions throughout their shows. Due to a wide range of topics and guests from different areas of life, it was expected to find even more tag questions. As was previously stated in the section *Results and discussion*, the most frequent tag questions were the affective tags, used in order to facilitate and soften the interaction between the hosts, guests and the audience. This type of tag questions comes very naturally and accurately in a discourse throughout the shows, whether used as politeness devices that invite guests to participate in a conversation or as softeners used to soften the force of utterances. The results obtained indicate there were no particular differences regarding the usage of tag questions between the female host Ellen DeGeneres and the male host David Letterman. Similar characteristics of their language can be explained due to the fact that they discuss the same issues and have the same target group, and the hosts share similar social status and education. The results obtained in this small-scale study support Cameron and her claims that gender cannot be related to language in isolation. Other socially relevant features like age, social status, education, ethnicity should be taken into consideration.

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