

# Perspectiva Sociolingüística sobre estudios de Lenguaje y Género

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## Resumen

Este estudio de investigación tiene como objetivo analizar aspectos de lenguaje y género dentro del marco sociolingüístico, con el fin de contrastar diversas investigaciones relacionadas con las diferencias entre sexos a la hora de hablar mediante la presentación de estudios que refutan los anteriores. Además se busca desmitificar algunos dichos populares y estereotipos consolidados en nuestra sociedad, teniendo como consecuencia la existencia y permanencia del sexismo, que se analizará desde el punto de vista sociolingüístico, examinando estudios de lenguaje y género desde sus inicios, comparando diversas investigaciones con el fin de alcanzar una conclusión final: no existe ningún principio Universal.

**Palabras clave:** Prestigio Encubierto, Hipercorrección, la Paradoja del Género, Estereotipos y Dichos Populares.

**Title:** A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Language and Gender Issues.

## Abstract

This investigation is aimed at dealing with gender issues within the sociolinguistic field. The main objective is to contrast several sociolinguistic investigations regarding women and men's differences in speech by providing opposite studies which refute the previous ones. Other issues such as the approaches employed in gender studies from their beginning will be explored, by providing a variety of examples to clarify and support some theories or assumptions. On the whole this survey will deal with the trajectory of gender studies since their origins, by contrasting several studies with the aim of arriving at a conclusion: there is no Universal Principle.

**Keywords:** Convert Prestige, Hypercorrection, Gender Paradox, Deficit-based Approach, Dominance-based Approach, Difference-based Approach, Social Constructionist Approach, Stereotype and Folk Belief.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 1960 many studies about "language and gender" has been carried out by pioneer sociolinguists such as William Labov, Peter Trudgill, Penny Eckert or Robin Lakoff, among others. Several assumptions, overgeneralizations, statements or stereotypes have been set across history, but none of them can be studied under the concept of "universal" principle, which encompasses clear definitions or explanations related to gender differences.

It may seem easy to differentiate or to establish clear cuts between gender and a second term, which is inevitable related to it, sexuality; although it is not as obvious as it looks like. Language in relation to sexuality and gender should be perceived as two different categories which, indeed, are intertwined. But, what is gender? What is sex/sexuality? And in which ways are they similar or different?

### Justification

This investigation is worth carrying out because of its clear message and intention. It deals with a real and actual problem that is still appearing in everyday's conversations, work areas, school classrooms and even on TV. It provides real and ordinary examples of sexism in language that may not be taken into account, apart from some folkbeliefs that people have internally acquired some centuries ago and that are still used by a great majority of social classes and collectives. That is why this investigation makes an attempt to contradict all these false assumptions. Besides, it offers some solutions for several sexist examples regarding the linguistic context (e.g. the singular they).

In terms of possible incidences within its application in class, students may not understand the seriousness of this issue because of the age or due to the lack of background in this particular topic. Moreover, this investigation could be

incorrectly considered a mere paper complaining about the sexist treatment towards women. This study, however, is not only that but also a great opportunity to take some easy and practical solutions into account in order to arrive at a better society in terms of equality.

### Gender vs. Sex

Firstly, it is important to define gender and sex so as not to mix these terms up. According to Natalie Schilling (2011:218):

Gender is conceived as a complex sociocultural and socio-psychological construct that is not reducible simply to biological or physiological sex. (...) Gender has to do with matters such as social and economic roles and relations (including, crucially, power relations).

Whereas sex categories, as Wardhaugh & Fuller (2015: 312) claimed, “are based on the biological distinction (...) between ‘male’ and ‘female’”. In other words, based on these descriptions, sex is related to male/female distinction, a quality each human being is born with; while gender has to do with femininity and masculinity, which is a feature each person may construct on their own.

Therefore, gender can be considered a social construction, something we acquire daily through our contact with society. As it is written in the introduction, gender seen as a continuum can increase or decrease: each individual may be “more or less masculine”. (Wardhaugh & Fuller 2015).

As the feminist writer Virginia Woolf claimed in one of her most well-known books, *Orlando (1928)*, and in one of her most celebrated essays, *A Room of One's Own (1929)*, gender is a social construction. She challenged the traditional notion of identity as a single fixed self. Instead, she provided a more complete explanation for one's identity. According to her, the new idea of different selves within each person was linked to the idea of different times: memories; different subjective experiences of the self. As well as the self, gender is always changing (continuum) as our relationship with different significant people -and our memories of them- keeps changing. Both *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* share common concerns such as the ideal of androgyny as the most creative state of gendered self for men and women. Therefore, instead of considering gender as a fixed or static sociolinguistic variable, we will take into account Virginia Woolf's affirmation that gender is dynamic, and socially constructed. Many sociolinguists agree with this viewpoint (as written above), whereas others prefer the opposite version of it.

Connell (1993: 170) stated that “both femininity and masculinity vary” within the same person. Being born female or male does not imply that a person ought to be more masculine or more feminine because of his/her sex. It is something that we learn to acquire since we are children by our education at home and at school. How we behave as social individuals is determined by what we have been told about sex differences.

This inclination about gender as a social construct may lead us to another related concept: the ‘doing- gender’ (West & Zimmerman 1987). This idea implies that “gender is not something we *have*, but something we *do*”. (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p.313).

As Cameron (2006: 313) points out:

*Sex* is a word used in connection with the biological characteristics that makes humans and other animals as either male or female, whereas *gender* refers to the cultural traits and behaviors deemed appropriate for men or women by a particular society.

So, once we have defined and established the main differences about sex and gender by giving some authors and statements, we will move to the practice part. We will see different examples of studies that encourage several overgeneralizations and folk beliefs related to language and gender. Besides, opposite studies contradicting the previous ones will be provided in order to refute or demythologize some conventional beliefs that have been taken for granted over the years.

## Sexism in Language

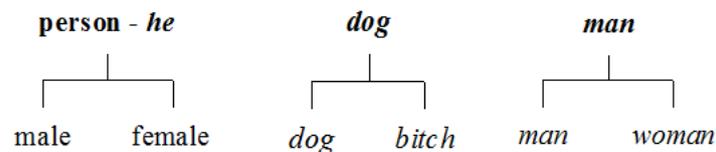
... language is a symptom, not a disease in itself. (...) And encouraging non- sexist language will not in itself lead to sexual equality (...) Drawing attention to the symptoms can make people more aware of the disease and more inclined to take steps con combat it. (Trudgill 1985: 9)

Sexism has always been part of our lifestyle since ancient history. As it has been seen women were not included in men's history, so why should they be included in men's language? Changing society leads to linguistic change, but not the other way round. Over the years, thanks to the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s, the Feminist Waves, women's right to vote... women start to write their own history alongside with men.

Nevertheless, sexism is still present in the media (TV, newspapers, books, adverts, etc.) and in many public areas, as it is stated in previous sections. In this section I will deal with some clear examples of sexist language, and if possible, I will provide some solutions to specific cases.

Firstly, it is important to highlight that English does not have grammatical gender, as German (*der, die, das*) or Spanish (*el, la, lo*) do. Thus, we could affirm that a neutral gender should be employed in generic cases, since a noun does not distinguish between feminine and masculine, generally. The problem is that "the male/female distinction is sometimes neutralized in favour of the male gender" (Hernández-Campoy 2016: 178).

This male preference evokes to the case of Androcentrism (previously defined). Some examples are: the use of *he* for any person in general (female/male); *dog* in the case of the general name of the animal; or *man/mankind* that encompasses man and woman.



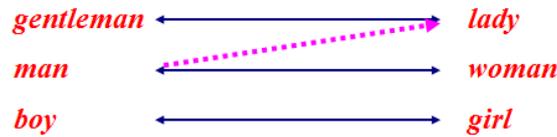
These distinctions should make us reflect and think critically about it. Why can't we use she, womankind or female dog? Why the masculine form includes the feminine one, and not the other way round? And if we cannot use the feminine in these cases, why not looking for a neutral word for both genders? If we all get used to employing words like humankind or they, a little progress could be achieved. And what about the third person singular for words such as everyone, someone or no one? Let's analyze these examples below (from Hernández-Campoy, 2016: 179):

- *Everyone thinks **they** have the answer.*
- *Has anybody brought **their** camera?*
- *Anyone can do it by **themselves**.*

I find it very successful to make use of this third person singular ("they") in order to avoid any gender controversy. Whenever you do not know the gender of the people you are referring to, the singular **they** could be employed as a practical solution. In fact, in many schools it is explained like this, in contrast to the generic "he". E.g. "the first person to finish **his** essay" (Herenández-Campoy 2016: 179). This example would be considered sexist, because the preference for the masculine gender is quite notable. A distinction of gender like, the first person to finish **his/her** essay, would be unnecessary in my opinion. If we base on the economy of the language, the singular **they** would be a better alternative to this distinction, taking into account that its use is gradually widespread among individuals.

Secondly, with regard to euphemisms and connotations, most feminine ones are treated as negative or pejorative. To begin with, let's start by listing some specific cases related to gender inequality. Lakoff (1975: 21) clarified that we tend to use euphemisms when a word displays a negative connotation or sounds inappropriate. The euphemism used regarding the word "woman" should be "lady". "Lady" should be a counterpart of "gentleman". "Gentleman", however, is not comparable to "man", in the same way as "lady" is regarding the word "woman". For example, in job lexicon, "lady" often

acquires some negative or adverse connotations. If we compare these two examples the meaning would vary: “cleaning lady/woman” means the same, whereas “woman doctor” and “lady doctor” imply different senses. The latter may be seen as an “insult”. Therefore the term “lady” usually “trivializes the subject”. (Lakoff 1975: 23).



Moreover, man and boy do not mean lack of respect, while pointing a “woman” is not the same, as pointing a “lady”. With the case of man, these differences are not found when talking. Consequently, “gentleman and lady are not real equivalents at all in real usage” (Hernández-Campoy 2016: 180). But why does woman mean lack of politeness, whereas lady evokes it? According to Lakoff, when we use the polite and refined word “lady” is because the word that it is being substituted, “woman”, is not “normally (...) thought of as having dignity or nobility.” The case of professions like

doctor or lawyer, however, is rather different. These professions do not imply any offensive connotations, since these professions have “dignity” enough so as not to be hidden like the previous ones. Therefore, “lady doctor” is not necessary (but it is with cleaning lady); “woman doctor” or woman lawyer would be perfectly appropriate. (1975:24). Likewise, “housewife” offers several euphemisms such as: “homemaker”, “household executive” or “household engineer”, since the profession might be “embarrassing or demeaning”, contrary to the case of doctor. (1975:20).

Now I would like to exemplify two parallel sentences extracted from Lakoff’s work (1975: 31) which, theoretically, may present the same meaning:

- *He’s a professional.*
- *She’s a professional.*

Is there any observable difference? The gender, we would say. But what about the semantic meaning of these two instances? Generally, if someone hears both sentences, they would vary their reaction depending on which one we choose. The former may refer to someone who is a real professional such as a doctor, teacher or something related to the same concept. On the other hand, the latter may be assumed as a euphemism of “prostitute” or “broad”. The author provides another synonym for “professional”, which is “business”. E.g. “she is in business”. It would acquire the same connotations as the prior example. (1975:30). We might come to the conclusion that some centuries ago women’s profession was mainly linked to this particular occupation, whereas men were then associated with high job status, as nowadays.

Another relevant point to be discussed in terms of linguistic sexism is the sense of belonging. Women have been always defined, not for their merits or efforts but, in relation to men. As an example I decided to take this question under critique: “What does your wife do”? “The question would, to a majority of men, seem tautological: ‘she is my wife- that is what she does.’” (Lakoff 1975: 31). Answers like these indicate that something is going wrong in our society. This sense of belonging has been strongly criticized over the centuries. Women, in this case, are treated as objects, as belongings, as properties. This sense of belonging is also reflected in women’s situation once they are married. Automatically they received their husband’s surname preceded by *Mrs*. It signifies not only that she is married (status), but that she is her husband’s property. Actually, *Mrs* comes from the addition of the Saxon Genitive to *Mr*. (property of). This discriminatory and ancient distinction between *Mrs/Miss* which was used since the Middle Age, is surprisingly still employed. Why women should have a title depending on whether they are single or married? And why doesn’t it happen with men? (Lakoff 1975).

Marital Status	men	women
married	<i>Mr</i>	<i>Mrs</i>
unmarried		<i>Miss</i>

Yet it is worth mentioning that thanks to the Women's Liberation Movement, a new neutral term appeared to express the same meaning as *Mr.: Ms.* This new term will offer women more "social independence of men (...) [as well as greater] acceptance." (Lakoff 1975: 42). "it is considered (...) an aide when women are hunting for jobs or seeking entrance to universities." (Hernández-Campoy 2016: 7). More solutions, like this implement of a neutral term in order not to specify their social status in comparison with men, should be accepted in English lexicon. In future years more and more new entrances will be acquired with the basic aim of equality between both genders surely. I am not willing to sound extreme or radical feminist at proposing these alternatives when using language, but rather objectively critic with this evident linguistic sexism that is found in our texts, books or even in our ordinary speech. I am just suggesting more attention and focus on the fact that these cases can be solved and avoided by a simple alternative word. We all do not have to make a huge effort to try to change this situation but if we start by recognizing the problem with some clear evidence, the solution would not be that far. Society is still in process of changing; language is still in the same process too.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

- (1) Regarding the objectives, this paper provides a descriptive overview or survey among several gender studies across history, accompanied by their repercussion and correspondent conclusions. As a descriptive work, results will be analyzed carefully; conclusions will be contrasted with some other alternatives; and different moments in history will be treated (e.g. women's liberation movement). Hence it is not included in the field of empirical studies, since there is not a specific empirical project to be carried out, apart from that of bibliographic revision.
- (2) A presentation of the phenomenology concerned with sexism in language will be presented as well as its treatment from a sociolinguistic view. Special attention will be placed on how sociolinguistics has been dealing with sexism in language through the development of gender (and language) studies with Labov's researches.
- (3) As stated in the previous section, different definitions and examples related to gender, sexuality and language are provided, as well as some sociolinguistic investigations with their corresponding researches refuting or contradicting them. We will analyze each particular study individually in depth in order to get a clear overview of each one so as to establish relations and comparison among one another. As many sociolinguists have pointed out, gender is a continuum in society, so theories will change and vary over time, and some new contradictions and paradigms will still appear in the future decades.
- (4) This research also aims to establish both a clear and accurate definition for several terms, such as sex and gender, in order to avoid confusion and ambiguities. Apart from this goal, demythologizing some conventional folk beliefs or ancient proverbs found throughout history may be regarded as one of the main objectives of this analysis. Statements as "women are weak, indecisive or insecure" or "women uses more standard forms than men" can be contrasted or refuted by some contemporary studies and theories based on these refutable principles.
- (5) Finally, the last but the main goal of this investigation paper is to implement all theories, principles and values in a real class to provide students with a wider insight of sociolinguistic studies regarding language and gender issues.

## 3. HISTORY OF GENDER STUDIES IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

### Origins and Development

It is not clear when the field of Sociolinguistics started to focus on gender studies. After reading many books and articles related to the origin of these researches, it is still not well established when the new sociolinguistic variable (gender/sex) began to acquire some interest. The dates oscillate from 1960s to early 1970s (Women's Liberation Movement). Taking the 60s as the starting point, it is noteworthy to mention that these first studies mainly focused on gender differences regarding speech behavior (phonological level) and discourse analysis (conversational style) between both sexes. As Grégoire (2006) claimed, these first approaches to language and gender differences were full of contradictions and lack of empirical evidence, since they were primarily based on the researchers' assumptions. It was William Labov the first sociolinguist "to notice the important role of sex/gender as a sociolinguistic variable" (Wodak & Benke 1998: 91), in addition to socioeconomic status (SES) and situational context, in his interviews. This new consolidated variable (gender/sex) is presented in his study on Martha's Vineyard and his New York study (Labov, 1966).

It is true that this field of study (language and gender) is relatively new, since early sociolinguistic approaches ignored gender as a variable. Jennifer Coates (2004: 4) suggested three reasons for this readjustment: the first two motives have to do with “sociolinguistic’s antecedents in dialectology and linguistics”; whereas the last one implies a change or improvement in women’s position in society.

Firstly, traditional dialectology’s studies were chiefly concerned with the same stereotype of informant: “non-mobile, older, rural and male” informant (NORM). This means that the results could not be totally reliable. If you leave apart mobile, younger, urban and female informants, obviously it will result in an incomplete and biased study. Indeed, many sociolinguists rejected this way of researching. According to Coates (2004: 4), “while many studies included informants of both sexes, studies confined to male speakers continued to be carried out”. As an example, she mentioned Labov’s study in Harlem (1972), as well as Reid’s study in Edinburgh (1976). It was not, as Coates affirmed, until 1980 were female speakers were taken into consideration.

Secondly, many reactions emerged from minority groups, as sociolinguistics was starting to gain the recognition of discipline. Collectives such as “working-class groups, ethnic minority groups [(e.g. black people)] or adolescents” (Coates 2004: 4) began to react for their rights and recognition of their particular varieties and dialects. Consequently, it meant the change of interest. Now the emphasis will be placed in non- standard or vernacular forms.

The problem, however, is that women were not included in those minorities groups. They were seen as a parallel group, which still did not have much attention. So while ethnic groups gained their correspondent attention at last, women were still seen as invisible.

The concept “Androcentrism” or “Androcentricity” has much to do with this avoidance of women’s place in society and sociolinguistic studies (Coates 2004: 5). As I mentioned before the profile of informants specified the feature of being “male”. Androcentrism implied that men were the centre of the Universe, society and practically everything. Back in history, men have always been at the central point, with no information about women’s contribution to any change or revolution in history. This led to women’s disappearance in relevant areas such as politics, church and, specially, education. Thankfully this appreciation has changed over the years with books such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992) written by John Gray (1992).

It was not until the late 60s and 70s, with the Women’s Liberation Movement and with the publication of *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975) by Robin Lakoff, when women’s situation changed or at least became issue of interest. (Coates, 2007). Lakoff’s book and the Women’s Liberation Movement will be discussed more deeply in the following sections.

### Labov’s Generalizations

With regard to the historical frame, sociolinguistic gender-specific studies were first carried out by William Labov in the 60s, as it is mentioned before. He was the pioneer in counting sex/gender as a sociolinguistic variable. That is why it is noteworthy to mention Labov’s tradition and to explain his principles and theories.

Taking linguistic change as the main focus, Labov (Wodak & Benke, 1998: 92) placed much emphasis in two characteristics of human language behavior:

- a) Women of all classes and ages use **more standard variants** than their equivalent men. As the standard is usually regarded as the language of the elite, for the rest of the population on an approximation to this standard implies a deviation from the language of one’s own group.
- b) The lower middle class (LMC) “hypercorrects” its language; it copies features of the middle class (MC), whose language behavior is more standard, in order to gain social prestige. But the LMC extends this copied usage to other phonological contexts as well (over-generalization) and thus stimulates language change.

Regarding example (a) women are said to use more standard variants than men do, therefore we can affirm that men, in the same way, use more vernacular variants than women do. This is compatible with Labov’s “Principle 2: the Linguistic Conformity of Women: For stable sociolinguistic variables, women show a lower rate of stigmatized variants and a higher rate of prestige variants than men.” (Schilling 2011: 223). There are several studies that demonstrate this principle. One of them could be the use of the variable (-ing). Women are said to use the standard variant [-ing], whereas men continue employing the vernacular or non-standard one [-in] in words such as running, writing or swimming, for instance (Schilling

2011). This variable (-ing) can be also observed in Trudgill's Norwich study depending not only on the social class, but also on the gender.

But, is this statement always applied in society as a rule or norm? And why is it remarked that it is women the ones who use this standard variety more than men? Which factors motivate this choice? Firstly it is important to make reference to the position women have had in history. They have always been the subordinated or oppressed group; their place in society has always been apart from men's place. Due to all these factors and situations across history, women, nowadays, try by all means not to be undervalued as in previous years. Consequently they will try to use as more standard variants as possible so as not to be discriminated for the way they speak. When looking for a job, for example, they usually have to make an extra effort: apart from the appearance, they have to make an effort at speaking so as not to be fired or not accepted for using several vernacular varieties.

The way I see it is that women not only choose more standard varieties because of the fact of having been a discriminated group in the past, but also because they are seen as model or example of proper speech and they should encourage it to their children. Moreover, they (women) may not want to take risks in the work field, for instance.

The question of child rearing should be one of the crucial factors to explain why women decide to speak as accurate and standard as possible. Women have been always taken as example for children; in fact they have always been associated with child rearing and house-wife occupations. Hence, as they had to educate their children they should be quite accurate as children's model of speaking. Labov (1990: 214) placed a significant emphasis on this women's function asserting that: 'women (...) are said to be more expressive than men or use expressive symbols more than men or rely more on such symbols to assert their position'.

Likewise, paragraph (b) is related to the previous one. Do LMC women fall into the hypercorrection's influence? And the answer is certainly yes. Hypercorrection can be simply defined as an overuse of a prestige form or more prestige forms (the opposite term is hypo-correction). They are consciously aware of the use of standard variants while the interview is taking place in order not to be included in the same group as "lower-class speaking" one. If they want to go one step upwards in the social status, they ought to speak as accurate as possible.

Following this concept of "hypercorrection" associated with lower middle class women, this graphic is placed here to illustrate more clearly the theoretical explanation.

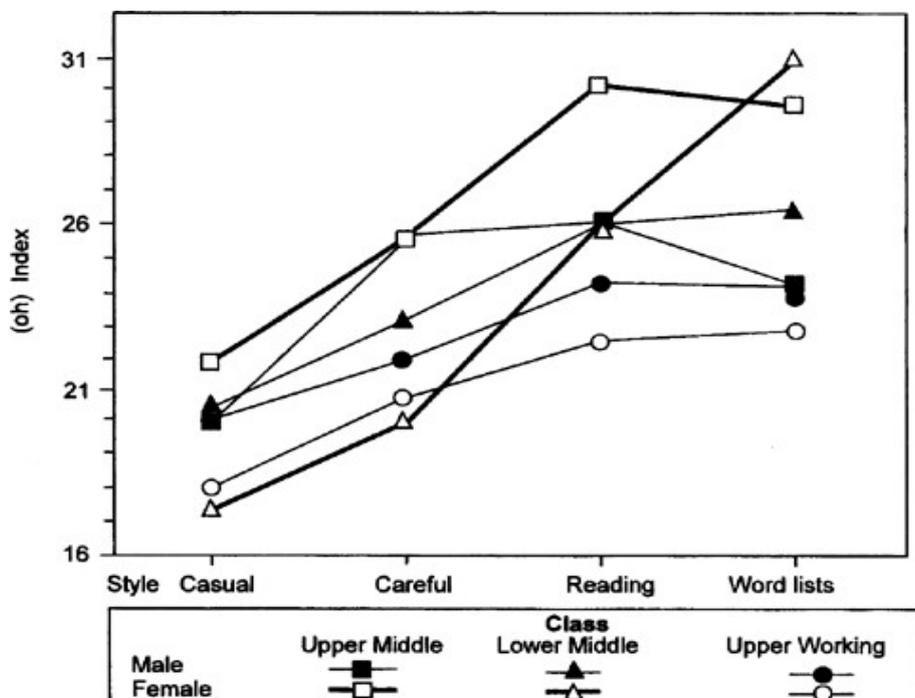


Figure 8.1: Style shifting of (oh) by three socioeconomic groups in New York City (after Labov1990: 224).

In this graphic we can observe that the lower middle class women extremely hypercorrect their speech when dealing with more formal tasks. They achieve more formal variants that we could expect from them, even more than the upper middle class. This is due to all the factors we have established before: social position and status. They change drastically their speech so as not to be included within the lower classes groups (e.g. upper working classes). Women's insecurity when talking may also be a crucial factor here; they want by all means to make clear their position in the hierarchical social pyramid, and of course one of the ways of achieving this proclamation of position is by modifying their speech. Therefore, as Wodak & Benke (1998: 93) pointed out, "men are judged according to their work, yet women are assessed according to their appearance, which includes language."

Peter Trudgill (1972) uses a similar framework as Labov's. His Norwich study concluded that "working-class (WC) men stick to their low-prestige nonstandard variety." (Wodak & Benke 1998: 93). As Labov explained, the situation of "cover prestige"<sup>4</sup> is given when men employ the use of nonstandard variants with the aim of marking "solidarity" which "highlight certain group values like 'masculinity'" (Wodak & Benke 1998: 93).

On the other hand, Trudgill's explanation for women's usage of standard forms complements Labov's general explanations. Trudgill affirmed that in society, women's position is much lower than men's and it will lead to women's necessity "to secure and signal their social status linguistically" (Trudgill 1972: 182).

Labov, however, did not explain the causes for those two assumptions (a) and (b). We assume why do women hypercorrect their speech (for social reasons) and use more standard varieties than men. Labov stated (1991: 181) that the "higher-prestige-consciousness of women is dependent on their specific position within a certain society". This, however, cannot be applied to all communities. In some places of India and Iran, for example, women use less standard variants than men, since they do not "participate in public discourse" (Wodak & Benke 1998: 93). Therefore, if they do not have contact with other people in public situations they will not be carriers of standard usage. Again this principle or assumption cannot be generalized to all societies.

In addition to these two assumptions, Labov (2001) proposed two more principles regarding men and women's patterns of speech:

"Principle 3: In linguistic change from above [the level of consciousness], women adopt prestige forms at a higher rate than men" (p. 274).

"Principle 4: In linguistic change from below, women use higher frequencies of innovative forms than men do" (p. 292).

Therefore, women consciously (change from above the level of consciousness) speaking make use of more standard forms than men (as we have seen in Principle 2), but at the same time, they unconsciously (change from below the level of consciousness) use greater frequencies of innovative variants. It means that at the same time that they are told to be standard users, they also acquire innovative or new forms which may be non-standard or vernacular alternatives. This contradictory or incompatible principles lead to Labov's "**Gender Paradox**":

Women conform more closely than men to sociolinguistic norms that are overly prescribed [i.e. standard forms, incoming prestige forms], but conform less than men when they are not [i.e. with innovative forms that are too new to have been accorded widely recognized prestige or stigma] (2001: 293).

These principles, however, cannot be adequately applied to all speech communities; they may vary from one another to a great extent. For example, in "Arabic-speaking communities" men are the ones who lead the use of standard variants, and not women as we have studied in most examples. That is, no principle or rule can be regarded as Universal Principle, as there are always cases in which they cannot be applied depending on the communities, social classes or geographical location. Besides, as Labov established, "gender differentiation is independent of social class at the beginning of a change, but that interaction develops as social awareness of the change increases" (Grégorie, 2006: 5). Therefore, we can conclude this section by asserting that women are more active in leading linguistic change, whether vernacular or standard.

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<sup>4</sup> **Covert prestige** "emerges in underreporting in self report tests when speakers claim to use linguistic features which have lower social status than those they actually do use." (Hernández-Campoy 2016: 86).

## Women's Liberation Movement

The Women's Liberation Movement "is the social struggle which aims to eliminate forms of oppression based on gender and to gain for women equal economic and social status and rights to determine their own lives as are enjoyed by men." (Wo:1). That is, this movement led by women aimed at achieving equal rights regarding men collectively. Women started to reject their treatment as minority, secondary group or simply, women, (with all the negative connotations that this term implies). They had been working in men's labors during the World War II demonstrating, in fact, that they were equally valid and suitable for those men's jobs. After all they, however, were being still regarded as socially, politically and economically inferior to men (submission). That is the reason why they wanted to react against society and its classic conventions.

During the second-wave feminism (from 1960s to 1980s) different ideologies and movements, from more neutral views to more extreme/radical positions, arose in order to fight for women's rights and dissolve these ancient views. One of them, as stated before, is the Liberation Movement (included within this wave). As Sink (2008:

1) claimed, "the 1960s was a year of change". And indeed it was, undoubtedly. Much progress was achieved during the movement. Nevertheless, the most important change was that related to the mind: consciousness. Not only women but people in general needed a conscious-based change in order to continue improving women's social situation. According to Thornham (1998: 26), "commitment to a female revolution in consciousness via the process of consciousness-raising became a defining characteristic of women's liberation groups."

Once we have briefly described and contextualized the Women's Liberation Movement, it is important to focus on the sociolinguistic consequences after the movement. With regard to sociolinguistic gender studies, this protest movement led to several notable works, which are noteworthy to mention. Authors like Robin Lakoff or Dale Spender, among others, signified a change or a revolution, if you want to say, within sociolinguistics.

Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) meant an impact in this field. Most of her works, but specially this one, deal with a new language, "woman's language", as she calls it. It is a distinctive or alternative language women do have in contrast with men's. Many reactions for and against this book appeared as soon as it was published. What is important here is the great effect it caused among gender studies when dealing with women's inferior position; some pejorative euphemisms associated with them; and above all, sexism in language from a critical point of view.

In addition, Dale Spender (1980) commented on two notable issues, regarding language and gender studies, such as sexism in society, with special attention to language and the concept of Androcentrism (previously explained).

On the whole, it is worth highlighting the fact that this movement triggered the appearance of several celebrated works (books, articles, journals, etc.) which discourse upon sexism, its origins, consequences, nowadays evidence and possible alternatives to combat it. Their main objective is to make people aware of this constant sexist situation and treatment in different areas (society, politics, economy, education..) with particular emphasis on language itself.

## Historical Approaches

Since the publication of Lakoff (1975), Sociolinguists have approached language and gender studies from different points of view and perspectives depending on the date. Among these approaches, we can distinguish four different ones: the deficit-based approach; the difference-based approach; the dominance-based approach and the social constructionist approach. We will explain each one in detail with their proper examples and opinions.

**The deficit-based approach** "holds that women's linguistic usages are inferior to men's and usually indicative of 'weaknesses.'" This linguistic "weakness" may be linked to the historic and biological weakness women have been suffering over the years. As evidence of such feature, women, according to some sociolinguistic studies, tend to use more "hedges, tag questions, and indirect requests and commands". This approach is known as the oldest or the earliest one in gender studies. (Schilling 2011: 220).

In Lakoff's work (1975), she wrote about the "women's language" (WL), which shows as main features the ones that have been mentioned above (hedges, tag questions, etc.), apart from "empty adjectives" such as "nice" or "divine" in an exaggerated intonation (Coates 2007: 65). Obviously, this approach was challenged, since it implied that women's language was weak and "deficient" and that woman should learn to speak men's language in order to be valued in society.

But, do all women talk by using hedges or tag questions most of the time? Is their language weaker than men's? And why? This presumption that women talk showing more uncertainty or insecurity due to the use of tag questions, for instance, to ask for confirmation or agreement, is a folk belief. Some empirical studies have demonstrated that this affirmation may vary depending on the situation, context (private or public conversation), or even the number and the gender of the participants. Holmes (1984) found the opposite view in her/his study. "Men were more likely to use tag questions that indicated uncertainty." (Wardhaugh & Fuller 2015: 324). Indeed, the University of Michigan stated that 'there is no specific gender-related effect on speakers' hedging frequencies in academic speech. (Poos & Simpson 2002: 20). Therefore, men use as many hedges and tag questions as women. Is their language equally weak or strong, in this case? What is clear is that this approach (deficit-based) is no longer used nowadays because there is not accuracy in their presumptions and, as it has been written, there is no final conclusion. Moreover, it is quite old-fashioned to think that women's language is weaker than men's, apart from being extremely sexist. Also another study by O'Barr & Atkins (1980) exposed that in courtroom speech, it was not women the ones who use more "weak" variants, as defined in Lakoff's book, but people who had less institutional power. So it was not an issue of gender, but rather, it was related to institutional status and power.

**The dominance-based approach**, as its name indicates, has to do with power-based relations (dominance). And who is considered to be more powerful, men or women? According to the majority of people, this is quite an easy and clear answer for obvious reasons: men are physically stronger than women. This, however, is not just a matter of physical strength, but a matter of history (men's social dominance over women). Women have always been inferior to men throughout history. They acquired the right to vote in the twentieth century; they were excluded or, more accurately, not accepted in higher education institutions (universities); they were treated as physically and intellectually inferior in comparison to men; they were excluded from any kind of political power, apart from the church or the monarchy (they have always occupied a second place in each field); in short, men have always been superior to women (dominance-based approach). We could divide both sexes in two concepts: the oppressor (men) and the oppressed (women).

This women's powerlessness can be extrapolated to language behavior. Women have presented a subordinated attitude in language in terms of power relations. For example, as Wardhaugh & Fuller (2015: 325) stated, in a cross-gender conversation, "women ask more questions than men, use more back channeling signals (i.e. verbal and non-verbal feedback to show they are listening)". What this means is that women tend to participate much more than men in the conversation, as well as to encourage the other participants to continue talking, by using questions and waiting for the answers. This shows much interest from their part. They also "do not protest as much as men when they are interrupted" and usually use pronouns like "you" and "we". Men, on the other hand, "interrupt more, challenge, dispute, and ignore more, try to control what topics are discussed". As we have seen, men not only tend to interrupt with more frequency than women, but also they control the topic in more conversations than women. Women, however, present a higher use of back channeling signals, as stated before.

This belief or assumption can also be found in literature. There are many books across history that reflected the women's role while holding a conversation with men. The key ingredient for them was to keep silence. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) the main characters, Jane, as well as most women that appear in the novel are repressed because they have always been told not to speak. Whenever she talks to her husband, Mr. Rochester, she, as a woman, is the passive receiver. Here there are some examples related to the passive role of women and how their acts are controlled by men's desire to speak or keep silence.

"In that sense I do feel apprehensive -- I have no wish to talk nonsense (...) do you never laugh, Miss Eyre? Don't trouble yourself to answer (...) The Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs; and you fear in the presence of a man and a brother -- or father, or master, or what you will -- to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly: but, in time, I think you will learn to be natural (...). (Brontë [1992] 1847: 121)

"Instead of speaking, I smiled; and not a very complacent or submissive smile either" (Brontë [1992] 1847: 116).

In addition, "female-style" is usually associated with the concept of "friendly conversation", whereas "male-style" is usually related to uncooperativeness (Henley & Kramarae 1994: 391). According to Schilling (2011), misunderstandings between men and women are not always well-intentioned, they often have a purpose. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992: 467) stated that "when a man making sexual advances toward a women interprets her 'no' to mean 'yes', the man is by no means unaware of women's different communicative style". Men think they have the power to give their own and personal meaning to what a woman says. This situation, however, must not be applied as a general rule regarding men's

attitudes. There are other examples in which the misunderstandings are “really innocent” such as in a wife-husband context for giving advice.

Nevertheless, this belief cannot be applied in all situations or conversations. James and Clarke (1993: 268) after analyzing some studies came up to the conclusion that “men are much more likely than women ‘to use interruption as a means of dominating and controlling interactions’. What this observation implies is that it does not matter who talks, women or men, both interrupt equally. Or in other words, the action of interruption which may be linked with power or control of the conversation does not depend on gender differences. The context or the situation plays also an essential role in this explanation. We do not talk the same (men and women) in public situations than in private settings. Men may interrupt more in public conversations, while they may use back channel signals in a more private one.

“All men are not in a position to dominate all women” (Talbot 2010: 101). And this is quite true. As it is stated above all men do not control the process of a conversation (when it ends or what to talk about) in the same way as women do not always show interest in the conversation (back channeling signals) and interrupt in order to change the topic. Therefore we can summarize this approach by affirming that “dominance clearly fails as universal explanation of gendered language differences” (Wardhaugh & Fuller 2015: 325).

**The difference-based approach or two cultures approach** leaves apart all explanations that we have seen before. Women and men do not talk differently because of power relations (although power connotations are also present implicitly), weakness or subordination. They are simply different, in terms of culture. They belong to different “subcultures”. And this “enculturation” makes linguistic strategies differ from one gender to another while speaking (Schilling 2011: 220).

In 1980s, these different subcultures (male and female) led to “the women’s growing resistance to being treated as a subordinate group.” (Coates 2007: 65). We, society, individuals in general, have always unconsciously mixed ‘culture’ with ‘male culture’. These distinct subcultures indicate that each way of speaking should be studied within each separate field. Women’s language should be analyzed “outside a framework of oppression or powerlessness” (Coates 2007:66). Each gender uses different linguistic and paralinguistic strategies at speaking and, obviously, both genders’ strategies are equally valid. This approach, however, has been considered controversial in “mixed talk”, as Deborah Tannen has stated in her book *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (1990) and John Grey did in his book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: the Classic Guide to Understanding the Opposite Sex* (1992).

According to Tannen (1990), girls and boys grow up in different social groups within the same sex, and each group encourages specific values. Women promote solidarity, feelings and affection; while men, in turn, promote “hierarchy” and competitiveness. Hence, when interrupting and changing the topic of the conversation these different values are taken into account. In the same way, women, as it is stated before, use more back channel signs and favor the continuity and maintenance of the conversation by using more questions in order to show more interest. Consequently, all these factors will lead to misunderstandings (Schilling 2011: 225).

These two authors (Tannen and Grey), among others, were interested in the aims or “goals” of these two groups, rather than in the difference itself. Each group (men and women) have different goals when talking (“conversational goals”). That is why they tend to misunderstand what the other group might mean by saying a simple sentence. They both may have different ways of saying the same thing (Wardhaugh & Fuller 2015: 326). As Maltz & Borker (1982:202) pointed out, “when the two genders try to communicate with each other, the result may be miscommunication”. One example would be the use of “mhmm”, “yeah”, “I see” that varies from one gender to another. Women tend to use this expression to show attention, whereas men tend to use it so as to show agreement. In conclusion, it is clear that women and men employ different “rules” or conversational strategies in a conversation and those “rules often conflict” (Wardhaugh & Fuller 2015: 326). Unfortunately even this approach is not exempt from critiques. The question of power relationships may also have some links with it. Although it is established in this approach that both groups talk differently there are some assumptions that men talk better than women; and vice-versa. In addition, it is also said that women talk differently by using more questions and sympathy because of their insecurity over the years. As we have seen in the power-based approach there is a common suggestion that “girls’ cooperativeness and focus on other’s needs are essential for subordinate social groups when interacting with the superordinate group [(men)]” (Schilling 2011: 226). Obviously the supporters of the dominance-based approach will agree in affirming that the theme of power is the main concern in gender relations. Yet this is not the case of this approach.

This common disbelief can be spread out to many other examples. As it is written above, the inoffensive use of “mhmm” with its different connotations (agreement and attention) may lead to some misbeliefs. For example, as women use this expression most of the time they may seem to be agreeing with men frequently. This assumption is what men may think according to their assumption of what “mhmm” means. Obviously we have the other position: as men do not employ this expression with frequency, women might think they are not being listened. Therefore, this misunderstanding is a consequence of gender’s different subcultures. Hence “gender socialization affects both groups’ ‘linguistic usages” (Schilling 2011: 226).

These generalizations related to women and men linguistic usage have been object of some criticism. Not all women encourage participation and sympathy as well as not all men compete and interrupt in their speech. It also differs depending on the speech community you are analyzing. Furthermore, Tannen’s assumptions are based on “Only a very small segment of society: white, straight, middle-class speakers”, which means that it they cannot be applied to a wide range of the population (Schilling 2011: 226).

### Folk Beliefs and Stereotypes

The term “folk belief” refers essentially to how women and men are believed to speak, in the case of gender studies. Its origin goes further back than gender’s first studies. Proverbs and folk beliefs have always been part of all communities of speakers. They are often directed to “women’s verbosity” (Sunderland 2006: 27). Jennifer Coates (1993: 16) mentioned some of the most popular folk beliefs:

- ‘A woman’s tongue wags like a lamb’s tail’ (England).
- ‘Men talk like books, women lose themselves in details’ (China).
- ‘Never listen to a woman’s words’ (China).
- ‘Three women make a market’ (Sudan).
- ‘Three women together make a theatrical performance’ (China).
- ‘Women are nine times more talkative than men’ (Hebrew).

However, there is no total evidence that women were that talkative in the past; it is just a question of past assumptions or myths. If we compare, as Dale Spender (1980) did, women’s silence across history to their excessive speech in recent history, the difference will be huge. I mentioned this because there is a common belief which affirms that women talk as much as they can in order to not feel quiet anymore. As they have always been told to keep silent by men, it is like a way of defending themselves and revealing.

In addition to this belief, we find a complementary one. It is not only claimed that women talk more than they want to in order not to keep silent, but also that women talk about nothing. It means that it is a matter of quantity, not of quality. Yet this “folk belief” has been left apart from women’s speech. In English fiction, we can also find folk beliefs related to women. Here are some examples:

- ‘Silence gives the proper grace to women’ (Sophocles, *Ajax*).
- ‘How hard it is for women to keep counsel!’ (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II.iv).

Another very well-known concept, “stereotyping”, is “at the center of the notion of folk linguistics”. Folk linguistics is then defined as the “non-linguists’ beliefs about language; for example, the belief about women’s verbal incontinence” (Talbot 2003: 472). Stereotyping, on its own, mainly focused on specific human features in order to exaggerate them, as Talbot (2003) affirmed. We have dealt with some previous examples of stereotyping so far (women talk a lot, women are always gossiping, etc.).

Otto Jespersen (1922), a well-known scholarship, has been hardly criticized by the female community over the years. He has always been accused of sexist because of his excessive use of pejorative adjectives when addressing women. In his chapter, “The Woman”, which is included in the book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922), presents women as people who talk “a lot but making no sense” (Talbot 2003: 469). As it seems, he belonged to the Androcentrist tendency of placing the man in the centre while putting the women apart; to be more specific, in a lower level.

Even nowadays sexist stereotypes are present in our “advanced” society. In particular, English shows a wide variety of adjectives when referring to “vocal women: scold, gossip, (castrating) bitch, parrot and harpy” (among others) (Talbot 2003: 469). Unsurprisingly, they all present a negative connotation. These sexist adjectives or stereotypes are seen and perceived, whether explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly, in books, magazines, TV-programmes or even at schools or work places.

As Talbot (2003:470) explains in her book, stereotypes mean “simplification, reduction and naturalization”. She recognizes, however, that bad or negative stereotypes are mainly related to minorities or subordinated groups in society (i.e. women).

In 1980s, Cameron held that there were many non-scholar people joined in groups that created what is now called “feminist folk linguistics”. This new branch of folk linguistic may come ‘straight from the pages of Jespersen’ (Cameron 1985:34). Folk linguistic beliefs related to women’s language use are characterized by Cameron in the following list (1985:35):

1. Disfluency (because women find it hard to communicate in a male language).
2. Unfinished sentences.
3. Speech not ordered according to the norms of logic.
4. Statements couched as question (approval seeking)
5. Speaking less than men in mixed groups.
6. Using co-operative strategies in conversation, whereas men use competitive strategies.

Most of these characteristics may be found within the three different approaches (dominance, deficit, and difference) mentioned in previous sections.

Yet once we have presented a great amount of stereotypes related to women’s verbal incontinency it is crucial to mention that in late feminist researches about this issue the results were very much determining. There is “quantitative evidence that men talk more than women, in public places at least” (Talbot 2003: 479).

Allan and Barbara Pease, described some interesting questions most people have thought of related to both sexes in their book *Why Men Don’t Listen and Women Can’t Read Maps* (2000). Some of their most notorious questions are:

- Why men really can’t do more than one thing at a time
- Why men offer solutions, but hate device
- Why men want sex and women need love
- Why women talk so much and men so little

In *Women, men and Language*, Jennifer Coates (2004) divides chapter 2 (the historical background- folklinguistics and the early grammarians) in different areas such as vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation. We will analyse each section individually in the following paragraphs.

With regard to vocabulary, women are accused of an exaggerated over-use of adverbs or adverbial forms. One example can be found in most of Jane Austen’s novels in which the main heroine’s antagonist is described by the excessive use of adverbial forms. In *Northanger Abbey*, it is not Catherine, the main character, but Isabella who talks this way (Coates, 2004: 11):

“My attachments are always *excessively* strong.”

“I must confess there is something *amazingly* insipid about her.” (*Northanger Abbey*, Ch. 6)

I strongly believe that women do not exaggerate when using adverbs or adverbial forms. We are said that we always resort to details when telling a story, for instance. That is another folk belief widely known. That is, not only adjectives are used to specify, but also adverbs. According to Lakoff (1975: 8), “women (...) make (...) more precise discriminations in naming colors than do men.” And surprisingly it is true. Men do not normally distinguish between purple or mauve;

between light blue and aqua marine; white and beige, etc. Why do women are able to do that? Maybe because we pay more attention to colors, but is it an innate ability that only women have? And what about men? Is it parking their innate ability? As demonstrated, stereotypes will never disappear from our society, and consequently, from our language.

Look at these examples from Lakoff (1975: 10):

- a) Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.
- b) Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

Inevitably, we would associate sentence (a) with women's language, whereas sentence

(b) would belong to men's language. It is just because of the first expressions (shit and oh dear), that we may associate the sentences like this. If we go further by analyzing these two sentences more deeply, we can assert that women sometimes, as well as men, use swear words or expressions like "shit!" (Men's language, as Lakoff defines). Despite the fact that women use men's language, men do not often use women's language. Would you imagine a man saying "oh dear!?" Of course you will, but you will inexorably judge him of being homosexual. That is the ugly truth nowadays. We believe in progress, but in practice we always move a step backwards. Why a man cannot say those "women's expressions" without being judged or criticized? And why are women less feminine or more masculine, if you prefer, when they use taboo or swear words?

It is true that women and their language are taken as the model role when rearing a child. Lakoff (1975) points out that children (both sexes) first learn women's language and then they start acquiring men's language by establishing contact with other people (school, extra-activities, etc.). In that sense, there is a point in which they are totally

bilingual and they need to code-switch the style depending on the situation (context). In the case of the boys, they usually start to get identified and associated with their father when they are teenagers and, consequently, the father's language becomes the goal in the boys' mind. That is why the boy starts to get rid of the mother's language in order to completely and solely inherit the father's and unlearn the previous one.

The key point here is that men can switch to either language without justifying or specifying the reasons why doing that; whereas women should only present the women's or ladies' language so as not to be judged. Why do men have the possibility to change styles whenever they find it appropriate? If they have the men's language, the academic one, the formal one, why do they have to change? The problem is that if they change the variety nothing happens, although a woman is going to be criticized whatever happens. If she talks like men when addressing some scholar man she would change the style in order to fit in that conversation. Women should always be aware of the context with the aim of not feeling apart or uncomfortable. They should always find the correct moment to change style, while men can do it whenever they believe it advisable.

In addition to these examples, Jespersen once affirmed that 'women (...) more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say.' (1922: 250). This means that as women do not know exactly what they are talking about, men, at the same time, always know what they want to say from the very beginning of the sentence. Obviously there is no empirical evidence about this undemonstrated and absurd assumption.

Regarding swearing and taboo language, it has always been assumed that men tend to swear more than women do. We, women, are believed to talk politely and correctly. Men usually say what first comes to their mind, while women generally try to change the words so as not to be judged as vulgar. Euphemisms are an interesting way of avoiding undesirable words or expressions.

Talbot (2003: 480) clarifies that we all should bear in mind that men and women are not "homogeneous groups". It is perceived in men dominating most public sectors such as congresses and conferences speeches at Universities; in "schoolboys dominating classrooms, with the encouragement of their teachers"; or in general meetings or reunions. These stereotypical practices should be contested immediately through direct action. School girls cannot be silent while adoring boys' speeches. They should

participate and interrupt, and why not, give their opinion about the matter. We are supposed to be all equal although sometimes some people might forget about it. There are many stereotypes or generalizations, as you may call it, about both genders, but once they pass the limit, they should be stopped. Although nowadays it is being claimed that women talk better than men and that we are no longer undermined or submitted to them (linguistically talking), this is also a

generalization that does not happen in the majority of the cases. If women are still undermined in society, they will be the same in economic, social or linguistic areas.

We, or at least I, do not want to be or to speak better than men, just to speak myself, as I want or as I decide, not as a woman, but as a person. I think we all should have this concept present in mind: we are people; we are individuals who think, speak and act differently from one another. It is not a matter of gender or sex, but of identity. As the difference approach claims, we, women and men, are different, but what it forgets is that each woman far differs from another woman; the same happens in the case of men. Although we are different groups, sexually talking, since it is biologically tested, we should not talk in a way or another because of our gender or our sex. And if we continue drawing attention to those ancient stereotypes related to women gossiping or verbal incontinence; or to men's inability to do two things at the same time; we will follow the same mechanical speaking pattern just because of a tradition. As post-modernist writers say, the past can be changed. It is us, people in the present, what can change it (stereotypes, folk beliefs or myths). The word folk-belief means beliefs made up by the folk. Therefore, in the same way that we created them, we can erase them or change them.

#### 4. RECENT APPROACHES

**The social constructionist approach** is one of the most outstanding approaches included in nowadays society. This approach affirms that: "Gender identity is seen as a social construct rather than a 'given' social category" (Coates 2007: 66). This has to do with the "doing gender". We do not talk differently because we have some inherent characteristics since we are born. We construct our social identity (and gender identity) as we live; experience and talk to other people; interact with speech communities and societies, etc. Therefore, we are always constructing and modeling the way we talk and act.

It is important to highlight that the four approaches that have been described within this research (deficit, dominance, difference and social constructionist) do not have clear boundaries among them: one approach can influence another one, and so on. Nowadays, the assumption that gender is a fixed and static characteristic of speakers has become obsolete. Indeed, the only approach that is being successfully used in these days is the social constructionist one. The other three has been considered outdated with the pass of time.

#### 5. PERSONAL DISCUSSION

After carrying this research out, we have arrived at several conclusions highly related to sexism. Firstly, women in general are said to talk more than men, to express weakness during the action and what's more, to feel inferior to them. They also should remain silent whenever the men desire to and whenever the topics of the conversation are not included in women's repertoire. Nevertheless, all these folkbeliefs and sexist comments regarding women's place in society are supposed to be obsolete; society and women's situation in particular have progressed notably leaving these previous sexist associations apart.

Unfortunately, the ugly truth is that all these ancient comments and expected behavior associated with women are sometimes still present in our contemporary society. Women are normally placed in a second place in comparison to men, that is, women are always men's shadows in the majority of fields.

Secondly, focusing now on sexism in language, we may affirm that there still much change to be done in order to eradicate this reality. Language is just a consequence of society inequality: people's beliefs, ideologies, education, culture... language sexism is just a translation of what it is being happening in the daily life. If we manage to change people's minds, we will be able to improve our way of talking and writing by equalizing both sexes. This way, much feminine words will not intrinsically contain negative connotations in opposition to their correspondent masculine ones.

Hence, we should make an attempt to integrate all these values in equality and progress towards a better society in class to make students aware of this reality.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

In this section I will briefly expound all the conclusions that I have developed while doing this investigation. I will present several ideas and assumptions following the order of appearance in the different sections previously established.

To begin with, I would like to make emphasis on the distinction between gender and sex. As it is clearly defined in the introduction, gender makes reference to the social construction either a man or a woman develop and learn during their contact and interaction with the surrounded society. It is a quality we acquire and construct, in contrast with sex. The latter has to do with our innate biological characteristics as human beings without dependence on society. These two concepts are sometimes confused, since the notions are blurred and not apparently differentiated by most people. This lack of attention regarding gender/sex differences is also visible in sexism.

Sexism is a plague that is present in nowadays society, which in turns leads to linguistic sexism. As stated in the introduction, written material or ways of speaking must not be blamed for it, but rather society and its individuals. If our consciousness does not change or start to detect and notice these symptoms, language will still be the consequence of it in the future years. Linguists have as one of their main aims to battle sexism proposing several solutions and alternatives (e.g. the use of singular they) in order to extinguish it.

Another important issue dealt within this paper is the generalized assumptions related to gender differences in speech. As clarified before, most general assumptions, folk beliefs or even ancient proverbs have been demonstrated to be fallacious. Although many sociolinguists have tried to capture and grasp as many instances as possible between women and men's speech (in cross-gender and one-sex conversations) the expected results did not emerge. It is empirically tested that, in spite of most people's beliefs, women do not talk more, worse or less secure than men do. There are some specific studies with their corresponding researches refuting them with the purpose of emphasizing the fact that there is no Universal Principle or Rule within language and gender sociolinguistic studies. There will always be another investigation which will contradict the previous one because of social, economic or political factors, among others (sociolinguistic variables). Each situation and context changes depend on the community you are focusing on. That is why we cannot affirm that a specific principle (i.e. Labov's principles) will favorably happen generally.

In addition, a review of the four main approaches regarding gender studies is provided in order to contextualize and define them individually. The purpose here is to evaluate which one of them is more suitable to fit in the treatment of this field nowadays. In the end the socio-constructionist approach is still being employed within language and gender studies, since the other three (dominance, deficit and difference) has become obsolete. This means that nowadays sociolinguistic gender studies are not focused on different languages (except some cases); the question of power and superiority associated with men (oppressor/oppressed); or weakness and insecurity related to women. All these antique procedures are now considered outdated.

Taking all these facts, studies and analyses into account, we can conclude this project by affirming that language and gender studies are one of the most influential fields within sociolinguistics since their emergence in the near 1960s with the Women's Liberation Movement; Robin Lakoff's (1975) *Language and Woman's Place* and Dale Spender's (1980) *Man Made Language*; and some other author's contributions (e.g. William Labov or Peter Trudgill).

As most sociolinguists assert, language and gender is still a subject of progress, change and improvement, as society constantly changes. Hence further studies and researches will be encountered in the future in order to solve these non-universal principles; the separation of two different languages (men and women's); and hopefully, linguistic sexism.

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