WOMEN'S LANGUAGE FEATURES FOUND IN "THE HELP" MOVIE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the features, functions and differences of women's language styles used by female characters of different skin colors in "The Help" movie. The movie was chosen because it involves many female characters and conversations among women of different races which are related to the purpose of this study. The data was collected by using documentation techniques and analyzed using qualitative methods based on the theory from Lakoff (1975) about women's language; the formal method is used to present the analysis. The result shows there are 23 utterances identified with a total of six of women's language features used by women's characters, namely empty adjective, super polite form, lexical hedges, intensifier, tag question and hypercorrect grammar. Two categories of functions in the features of women's language are found in this study, that is weakening and strengthening the function. However, the most used features that are useful as weakening the function of the speech, namely lexical hedges, tag questions, super polite form, and hypercorrect grammar. There are several differences in the language styles of women characters of different races in this study, such as the differences in the frequency and the features used in women's language.

Keywords: Women's Language, Women's Language Features, Lakoff

INTRODUCTION

Everyone in the world uses language to communicate and express their ideas, feelings, and thoughts. Language also has relationships with gender. According to Salamina & Tawami (2023), gender plays an active role in showing identity rather than biological meaning. In this life we are divided into two gender categories, women and men; they have different ways and styles when using language. The one focus in the study of language and gender in sociolinguistics is gender differences in language use. Wardhaugh (2006) stated that men focus on talking about sports and aggression when talking with their friends, while women usually talk about parenting, feelings, and opinions with their friends. Compared to men, women frequently speak more politely; this is related to Lakoff's statement that women usually speak by using tag and filler questions to make their speech softer because they want to avoid a direct and harsh tone when they are communicating with other people.

Lakoff (1975) proposed ten language styles regularly utilized by women that characterize the gender of females in communicating and using the language. This study analyzed the features,

functions and differences of women's language used by the female characters of different races in the movie entitled *"The Help"* using Lakoff's theory.

The initial motivation for this study is the interest in the phenomenon of language variation by different genders. However, in this study, the focus is on the same gender but of different races. Several related works have been consulted for this study. Yunita (2019) investigated the language of women contained in the YouTube video. The second study by Leoni (2018) analyzed the function of the language used by women in the film. Next, a study by Aini (2016) explored the language style of the female main character of the movie. Then, Ningrum et al., (2021) focused on contrasting the distribution of swearing expressions by the main male and women characters in a movie, the finding of which showed no significant difference is identified (cf. Chandra and Yulia (2018) and Syarifudin and Gunawan (2022)). Those studies have a similar broad topic as this paper in analyzing women's language. However, this paper provides a different spin in that the focus is still on women's language features but with comparisons across different races. This study could provide insights and implications into social life regarding the style of language of different genders and races.

DATA SOURCE

This study used the utterances by the characters in the drama movie with the title "*The Help*" (produced by Chris Columbus, Michael Barnathan, and Brunson Green, and directed by Tate Taylor). It is adapted from the novel of the same title by Kathryn Stockett in 2009. This movie tells the story of discrimination against two different races, the colored and white people. This film shows how racism occurs and how the person fights against racism in their environment. This movie was chosen because the story involves many female characters. In this movie, there are many conversations among women that talk about racism and the association of colored and white people, which are related to the purpose of this study.

METHODS

The documentation method is used to collect the utterance data in this research study. The steps are as follows: (1) Downloading the movie, (2) watching and listening to the conversation of the movie, (3) Taking notes and screenshots of every relevant utterance containing the women's language features proposed in Lakoff (1975); these utterances are the analyzed data in this study. For analyzing the data, this study applied the qualitative method. According to Creswell (2014) qualitative method is the method that relies on text or image data. This study used the theory from Lakoff (1975) in both categorizing the features and finding the functions of women's language utterances. The data analysis in this study is presented by using both informal and formal methods. According to Sudaryanto (1993, p. 145), the informal method provides the analysis in the form of description using phrases and words. He stated that all of the verbal statement is included in the informal method, meanwhile, the formal method provides the data by using numbers, graphs, symbols, or tables. The formal method is used to show the comparisons through graphs and numbers to explain the results of the study.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study applies the theory about language used by women that was proposed by Lakoff (1975) to carry out the analysis. Women's language is how women speak using their own language style. According to Lakoff (1975), women tend to talk according to the rules of politeness and interpersonal inquiry, whereas males speak in accordance with straight principles of dialogue and factual communication. Women have their own way and style of language when communicating. Women usually want to talk about personal things, such as family, parenting, and relationship problems, however, men tend to talk about sports, politics, or business. In accordance with Lakoff (1975) statement that the language of women consists of the linguistic aspects that make up feminine speech. The manner and language uttered by women tend to be different from men, ten features are formulated to identify women's language, such as an empty adjective, intensifier, tag question, lexical hedges, precise colour term, avoidance of strong swear words, emphatic stress, hypercorrect grammar, super polite form and rising intonation on declarative. Each of these features has a different function, there are two types of functions of women's language features, such as the function of weakening and strengthening the utterance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section focused on analyzing the language used by women in the film "The Help". There are three discussions in this part, such as an analysis of women's language features that are found in white and colored women's characters, the function of women's language features that are used by white and colored women characters and the differences in the use of women's language features between white and colored women.

1. The Features of Women's Language Used by White Women Characters

This part shows the language features analysis of white female characters in order to answer the first research question. In this analysis, It was discovered that white female characters use five features with a total of 15 utterances, these features are Tag Questions, Intensifiers, Lexical hedges, Empty Adjectives, and super polite form, the analysis of each feature will be discussed below.

1.1 Lexical Hedge

[1-1] (01:04:29 Minutes)

Minny: So what can you cook?

Mrs. Celia Foote: *Oh, um,* I can cook cornpone

In data [1-1] there is a conversation between a colored maid named Minny and her boss, named Mrs Celia. This conversation takes place in the kitchen when they cook together. The conversation starts when Minny asks Mrs Celia what she can cook. Hearing that question Mrs. Celia responds by using fillers at the beginning of the sentence, like "oh, um", representing the feature of lexical hedges that show gaps in the form of fillers or words in a conversation. Mrs Celia uses this style because she is unsure of what she will convey, where it is known that in this film Mrs. Celia's character is someone who rarely succeeds in making food, but still wants to learn to cook. The filler "oh, um" at the beginning of the sentence also serves as a sign of lack of confidence when she will start to tell what she can cook.

1.2 Tag Question

[1-2] (01:37:16 Minutes)

Mrs. Hilly: Nobody wanted to hire a sass-mouthing thieving nigra, *did they?*

Data [1-2] shows the use of the tag question feature when the colored maid, named Minny, apologized to Mrs Hilly for being impolite. Mrs Hilly responded with annoyance and uttered statements like the data above. In her utterance, Mrs Hilly uses women's language in the feature tag question, which is an interrogative fragment in the sentence that can urge the receiver to either confirm or deny the assertion. In the data above she said "Did they?" which is a question tag. This indirectly serves as a confirmation that her statement is true.

1.3 Empty Adjective

[1-3] (02:11:22 Minutes)

Aibileen : Churches from over two countries signed our books. All for you and me

Skeeter: *It's beautiful*

Data [1-3] can be classified into the feature of an empty adjective, which can be seen in the conversation between Aibileen and Skeeter. At that time Aibileen shows the book about colored people that Skeeter has written and published, which now gets appreciation in the form of signatures

from a lot of people. When Skeeters sees it, she says "it's beautiful" about the book. Sketeer's utterance is identified as an empty adjective, which are words that express emotions without any specific information. Skeeter's use of the empty adjective feature to show her admiration using the word "beautiful" which is a special term in women's language style. She uses this feature to express her appreciation for the people who signed that book.

1.4 Intensifier

[1-4] (00:56:55 Minutes)

Aibileen: It's a lonely road if a mama doesn't think their child is pretty

Skeeter: That's *very true*

The conversation in [1-4] takes place in Aibileen's house. The participants are Skeeter and Aibileen. This conversation occurs when Skeeter interviews Aibileen a black maid who works in white people's homes to be included in a book she will publish. In the middle of the interview, Aibileen told her story, while working for a white person where the mother in that house did not want to take care of their daughter. Aibileen expressed her opinion about it. A moment later Skeeters is aware and feels the same way, she answers "That's very true". Instead of just saying "That's true" she adds the word "very" which functions to boost and strengthen the word "true" in her utterance. In this case, Skeeter's utterance contains intensifier, which shows feeling and amplification of agreement about what Aibileen said.

1.5 Super Polite Form

[1-5] (00:16:54 Minutes)

Skeeter: All that talk in there today... Hilly's talk

Skeeter: *I'm sorry* you had to hear that

Data [1-5] illustrates the use of super polite form, which can be seen in the Skeeter's utterance and functions to expose something when communicating. The incident occurred in Mrs Leefolt's house during the Bridge Club event. Mrs Hilly uttered bad statements about colored people even though there was Aibileen who was serving them there, and Sketteer was aware of it. She then looked

for Aibileen in the kitchen and apologized to Aibileen. Skeeter says the word "sorry" even though that is not her statement. Skeeter apologizes to Aibileen about her friend's statement of the racism of skin colour. She has used this style to maintain her politeness as a white woman and to minimize any conflicts.

2. The Features of Women's Language Used by Colored Women Characters

To answer the first research question of this study, this section presents an analysis of the features used by colored female characters. There are five women's language features identified from a total of seven utterances produced by colored women characters. These features are Intensifier, Lexical hedges, Super Polite form, Hypercorrect grammar and Tag Question.

2.1 Lexical Hedge

[1-6] (00:51:20 minutes)

Mrs. Celia : Five other maids have already turned me down, let me at least get you some bus money

Minny: *Now, uh...*when did you hear me say I don't want to clean this house?

There is a conversation between Mrs. Celia and Minny, which takes place in front of Mrs. Celia's house. In the conversation above, it is found that the lexical hedge feature is used in Minny's utterances. Aibileen was confused by Mrs. Celia's statement that thought she didn't want to be a maid at that house. So Minny added the filler "uh.." to create a bit of a gap in her utterance to show her confusion.

2.2 Tag Question

[1-7] (00:24:28 Minutes)

Constantine: Ugly is something that goes up inside you, it's mean and hurtful, like them boys. Now, you're not one of them, *is you?*

Data [1-7] contains tag question feature. The participants in that conversation are Constantine, who is a colored woman, and Skeeter, who is a white woman. This conversation takes place in the

garden. At that time Skeeter was sad because no one wanted to dance with her and she was called ugly by the boys at the party. Knowing that case, Constantine tries to cheer Skeeter up and gives advice to be more confident. She uses a question tag after her statement by adding "is you?". It is used to ask for confirmation about the statement that she made.

2.3 Intensifier

[1-8] (00:02:59 minutes)

Aibileen: That's *so good*

Data [1-8] illustrates the use of an intensifier by Aibileen when talking to a child with white skin color. That child is Mae Mobley, the daughter of Mrs Leefolt. As a maid at that house, Aibileen also takes care of Mrs Leefolt's daughter. Aibileen often teaches the positive things to Mae Mobley, such as by saying the words "You are smart, You are kind, You are important ". Data [1-8] occurs when Mae Mobley repeats Aibileen's words, and Aibileen responds "That's so good". Instead of just saying "That's good", there is the addition of the word "so" in her utterance because she wanted to emphasize her statement to show her deep emotions. The word "so" functions to strengthen the word "good".

2.4 Hypercorrect Grammar

[1-9] (00:13:17 minutes)

Mrs. Celia Foote: Hello, is Elizabeth in?

Aibileen: She having bridge club right now. *May I take a message?*

In data [1-9] there is a phone conversation between Aibileen and Mrs Celia. Aibileen's utterance represents a form of hypercorrect grammar. The conversation occurs during the bridge club event at Mrs Leefolt's house. The phone is ringing and Aibileen who is the maid at that house receives the call. Mrs. Celia Foote who is a friend of Mrs. Leefolt asked about Mrs. Leefolt, and Aibileen replies that there was an event going on and she offers to leave a message. Aibileen talks to Mrs. Celia in a formal way with the use of "may" to ask permission to receive messages from Mrs. Celia

which will be conveyed to Mrs. Leefolt. She uses a style of hypercorrect grammar to make it politer and this also serves to create a distance between the status of a maid and her boss's friend.

2.5 Super Polite Form

[1-10] (01:11:11 Minutes)

Mrs. Hilly: Aibileen, are you enjoying your new bathroom over at Elizabeth's? nice to have your own, isn't it Aibileen?

Aibileen: Yes, ma'am and *I thank you.*

Data [1-10] shows Aibileen's use of the super polite form (i.e., polite language or expressions to maintain the status). The participant in that conversation, which takes place in Mrs Hilly's house garden, is Aibileen and Mrs. Hilly. The conversation begins when Mrs. Hilly asks Aibileen about the new separate toilets for colored maids. Mrs. Hilly assumes that colored people carry disease, so she took the initiative to provide separate toilets for colored people who work in white people's houses. Aibileen thanked Miss. Hilly about that new toilet, even though Aibileen is actually offended, because that discriminates against colored people. Aibileen still added the word "Thank you" in her utterance, even though she didn't like it. This style makes her language politer to maintain her status as a colored maid in front of white women.

3. The Function of Women's Language Features Used by White and Colored Women Characters

This section presents the analysis of the second research question, which is the function of women's language used by the women characters in the movie. Previously, it was explained that there are six features in the 23 utterances of female characters that contain women's language features when communicating with different races. It was found that there are several uses of women's language features in these utterances that function to weaken and strengthen an utterance.

3.1 Strengthening Function

a. Empty Adjective

Based on the previous discussion, there is an utterance that indicates using the empty adjective feature, which uses the adjective "beautiful". An empty adjective uttered by the character is used to show her admiration and expression of her emotions. The speakers will use their feelings to express them, so they will strengthen their utterances. The example can be seen in the conversation between Aibileen and Mrs. Skeeter in the data [1-3], that Skeeter uses the word "beautiful" to express her admiration for the book, so her utterance has a strengthening function to emphasize her expression.

b. Intensifier

Several utterances indicated intensifier features, such as the use of the words "so" and "very". This style is used to emphasize words and show strong statements, so the function of using the intensifier includes a strengthening function. This can be seen in the data [1-4] , in that conversation the use of the word "very" in Skeeter's utterance aims to strengthen the word "true", so the use of this feature in her utterance is included as a strengthening function.

3.2 Weakening Function

Weakening function exists in female language features that seem to weaken the power of the utterance. The weakening function is usually found in female utterances that shows doubt, and confusion or uses very polite language to respect the other person and to protect the image. Based on the analysis of the first problems in this study, several utterances have a weakening function, there are the utterances in the features of Tag question, Hypercorrect grammar, Lexical hedge, and Super polite form. The following is an explanation of its function:

a. Lexical Hedges

Lexical hedges feature is a gap in conversation that is usually used when the speaker is unsure about their utterance. Lexical Hedge appears 5 times in the utterances of women characters in this movie by using the words "well", "uh", and "um". They use that words and fillers to show that they are confused, have doubts, and lack confidence, therefore that utterance has a weakening function. One of the examples can be seen in the data [1-1]. The use of the filler "oh, um" in Mrs Celia's utterance that appears in data [1-1] shows that she is doubtful, she is not firm with her statement, so the filler becomes a weakening function of her utterance.

b. Tag Question

Three utterances feature tag questions. This might be used in situations where the speaker is making a claim but is unsure of its veracity. The tag question used by the female characters in this film is "isn't it?" and "did they?". This is used because the speaker indirectly wants to confirm the claim of her statement to the interlocutor but in a subtle way, so the utterance that contains this feature is a weakening function. The example can be seen in the data [1-2], where the speaker softens her statement by asking for confirmation from the interlocutor using the question tag, even though her intention is to justify her statement.

c. Super Polite Form

The style of this feature is the most used in the conversation of the female characters in this movie. They use a lot of words like "sorry" and "thank you" in their daily conversations. Women prefer to use polite language to maintain their status and they are expected to speak more politely than men. Therefore, the function of using this feature is to weaken the utterances. An example can be seen in the utterance from the data [1-5].

d. Hypercorrect Grammar

Women generally talk more formally, and they also use proper grammar in their utterances. Based on the previous discussion, there is a female character utterance that uses the hypercorrect grammar feature that can be seen in the data [1-9], the speaker in that conversation using the word "may" in her utterance that indicated the feature of hypercorrect grammar, she use this feature to make her utterance more polite and to create a distance of social status, so the use of this feature in this utterance is to weaken the function.

4. The differences of Women's Language Features Used Between White and Colored Women Characters

Based on the data that has been analyzed, it is identified that white female characters use five features of women's language with a total of fifteen utterances, while colored women use five types of women's language features with a total of seven utterances.
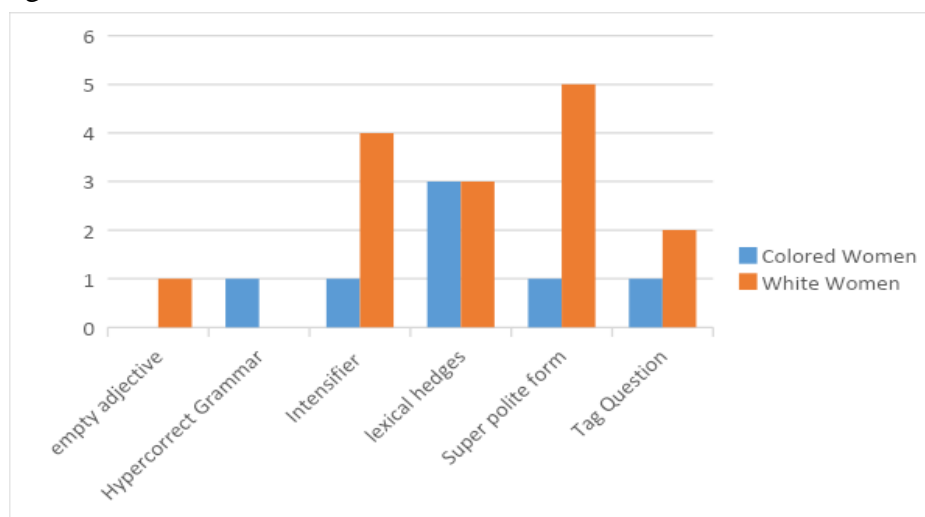

Figure 1. The distribution of the language features used by the white and colored women characters

Figure 1 reveals frequency differences in the use of language style in women characters of different skin colors. When talking with their opposite race, white women use five features such as an empty adjective, intensifier, lexical hedges, super polite form, and tag question. The super polite form feature is the one most often used by white women characters, appearing five times in their utterances. Besides, lexical hedges are the features most frequently used by colored women (three times in their utterances) in situations when the speaker is confused or unsure about what they said; besides, this style can be used to reduce the strength of an argument. Colored women characters rarely use women's language when speaking with different races. In Figure 1, it can be seen that only seven utterances of colored women use women's language styles with five features, there are Hypercorrect grammar, Intensifier, Lexical Hedges, Super Polite form and Tag question. White women use women's language styles more often than colored women. This phenomenon appears because white women in this movie have a high degree of status and authority, compared to colored women status who are maids or laborers. The white female characters in this movie are mostly bosses and socialites, so they use a lot of women's language to maintain their image and maintain their politeness as a powerful race in the movie. Two races of women characters in this film also have similarities and

differences in using the language style, they both use the features of Tag Question, Intensifier, Lexical Hedges, and Super Polite forms. But besides that, the data listed in the figure 1 shows that there are also differences in which white female characters use empty adjectives features, but there are no utterances by colored women that use these features, and it can be seen that the colored women characters use the feature of hypercorrect grammar, but there are no white women utterances that contain this feature.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous discussion, in this movie, there are 23 utterances identified with total six of women's language features used by female's characters when interacting with each other. It is identified that five features of women's language are used by white women characters with a total of 15 utterances, there are Tag Question, Lexical Hedges, Super Polite Form, Empty Adjectives, and Intensifier. Meanwhile colored women use five features of women's language in the seven utterances, there are Intensifier, Lexical Hedges, Super Polite Form, Hypercorrect Grammar and Tag Question. There are two categories of functions in the features of women's language, that is weaken and strengthen the function. It was found that the utterances in this study mostly use features that are useful as weakening the function of the speech (namely Hypercorrect grammar, Lexical hedge, Super polite form, and Tag question). Besides, there are also utterances that contain features with strengthening functions, such as the empty adjective and intensifier features. There was a significant difference in the language styles by women characters with different races in this study, such as the differences in the use of features of women's language. It can be seen that white women use a feature of empty adjective whereas colored women characters do not use this feature in their utterances, and colored women characters use the hypercorrect grammar feature but white characters do not use that feature. In addition, white women apply the style of women's language more commonly than coloured women.

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