

Title: “This is not their space”: variation, power, and feminism on Twitter

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Since Robin Lakoff (1973) theorized the existence of “women’s language”, several linguistic features have been presupposed to correlate with speaker gender. Among the features thought to characterize women’s language are politeness markers (Brown 1980; Herring 2000), absence of profanity (Jay 1999), more frequent hedging (Carli 1990), and a variety more closely approximating a prestige standard variety than men’s language (Gordon 1997). However, subsequent research suggests that these features are not reflective of gender but of power distribution, which often favors men, arguing that what was presumed “women’s language” is rather the language of the disempowered and is not derived from the speaker’s static identity but is used to create and maintain a dynamic identity (Gal 2012; O’Barr & Atkins 1980).

This project investigates variation of so-called powerless language among women participating in feminist discourse on Twitter, as compared with other discourses without an overt feminist agenda. I show that women employ or avoid features of powerless language in certain settings and that this pattern differs from what these same users do in contexts outside of feminist discourse.

Data were collected from a previously assembled corpus (Phillips 2014) of approximately 2.7 million tweets tagged with the hashtag “#yesallwomen”, a tag marking a Twitter thread which seeks to raise awareness of everyday sexism and harassment. One experimental corpus for this project was composed of the tweets of the 141 most active contributors to the #yesallwomen corpus who self-identify as women in their Twitter profiles (N=9,900 tweets). This “feminist” corpus was compared to a corpus of recent tweets authored by the same group of 141 speakers collected regardless of topic or hashtag (N=272,480 tweets). An analysis of intra-speaker variation across the two corpora compared four categories of linguistic features between the two samples: profanity, politeness markers, hedging, and nonstandard abbreviations. Measurement of nonstandard abbreviations was divided into two tests: rate of contracted lexical items like *wanna*, *gonna*, and *ima*, and rates of apostrophe absence in negative contractions.

Paired t-tests showed significant differences in all four dimensions of intra-speaker variation. When participating in feminist discourse, the speakers exhibit highly significant decreases in politeness and hedging ($p < .01$) as compared with their participation in nonspecific discourse. They also show significantly more frequent use of profanity ($p < .01$). These results suggest an increase in empowered language. However, use of nonstandard contractions was significantly lower in the feminist corpus. Women are often assumed to be more attuned to social status and thus are more likely to adhere to a prescriptive standard variety while hedging more, exhibiting more politeness, and using less profanity (marking their lack of power). However, this study’s results suggest that these features do not pattern together and should not be assumed to function cohesively as a marker of either gender or status. Rather, use of more profanity, few politeness markers, and little hedging when participating in feminist discourse may be a strategy for projecting a more empowered and aggressive stance which is then legitimated through conformity to standardized, academic written norms.

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