



SPOKEN INTERACTION BETWEEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A STUDY OF GENDERED DISCOURSE PATTERNS

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Abstract:

Language is a socially constructed system rooted in power dynamics, identity development, and cultural customs. Language variation is greatly influenced by gender in discourse styles and communication strategies. The present paper aims to find gender differences in spoken interaction among undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Sialkot. The research objectives are to identify linguistic differences between male and female students and to examine the extent to which gender affects face-to-face interaction. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire from a randomly selected sample of 13 male and 14 female students. The major finding is that female students use polite, expressive, and supportive language. On the other hand, male students use more direct, concise, and competitive language. Females also use hedging and emphatic expressions, desiring to preserve interpersonal harmony and reduce assertiveness. Most students acknowledged gender-based differences in communication styles. They believed that, although gender influences discourse patterns, these differences are also shaped by broader sociocultural norms, individual communication styles, and interactional goals. This research contributes to the growing body of work on gender and language in academic settings and offers useful insights for educators seeking to promote inclusive and effective communication.

Keywords: *gender; discourse analysis; spoken interaction; politeness strategies; sociolinguistics; university students*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of both oral and written communication skills is widely recognized and revered across all fields of work in the modern context. Though several efforts have been made to develop these skills among students, the results remain disappointing. The communication sciences literature suggests that fear of communication is a key antecedent to inefficacy in students' oral and written assignments. It is also known that graduates are coming into the labour market, and they bring with them a need for knowledge and skills that are beyond what they have obtained in their academic backgrounds in their fields of study.

Research in the field of language and gender has been conducted extensively over the past two decades. The scientists have sought to measure variations in male and female discourse. Sociolinguistic research has attempted to gauge variations in the use of linguistic forms by women and men in conversation. Such studies have produced a variety of interpretations of the study of gender discrepancies in all kinds of communicative situations. Gendered conversation style studies have given importance to the suggestion that men and women do not speak the same way and have theorized that the gender of the interlocutor is the key to influencing the behaviour patterns performed during an intercourse.

The reason is that the impact of gender on language use has been discussed in previous studies. A research paper titled "Boys' Linguistic Space Use in Small Group Discussions: Whose

Talk Dominates?" was written by Godhino and Shrimpton (2003). Their results showed that boys had less interpretative capacity but took the floor, whereas girls showed deeper and more creative levels of thinking. It was also proposed in the study that social background might play a role in determining participation in small group discussions, and it was shown that boys and girls have different styles of linguistic interpretation.

Akhter's (2014) study was an empirical study on differences in the language use of male and female students in tertiary education in Dhaka City. The study indicated that 32% of interviewees used formal language, with most informal language used by male respondents. Regarding the use of tag questions, 92% of users were female. In terms of speech tone, 82% of participants spoke loudly, 88% of whom were male. The analysis also found that 88% of females used hedges, and 92% of males used taboo words and slang. Importantly, the female participants utilized supportive language 100% of the time. Based on these results, the present study aimed to explore differences in language use between female and male university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

According to Wenjing (2012), women tend to use words with greater expressiveness, such as gorgeous, lovely, cute, divine, adorable, darling, precious, sweet, and charming. In their turn, men will be more inclined to employ rather banal terms like good, beautiful, and like. There are also variations in the use of adverbs: women prefer such adverbs as awfully, pretty, terribly, vastly, quiet, so, but men use very, utter, and really. In another study, Lakoff (1973) observed that females use more intensifiers than males, such as awfully, pretty, terribly, and quiet. The more frequently descriptive adjectives are used, the more it seems females can be considered more observant of their environment and have a greater tendency to express feelings in words. English has a female-identified lexicon that a man can avoid as inappropriate. Women are singularly good at the use of adjectives and adverbs, expressive and exaggerated, and the particular types that are used when referring to an acquaintance. In most instances, they refer to their friends as "dear" or "baby," among other terms. However, men will not pick such forms as easily because of societal attitudes associated with femininity or ladylikeness. A group of boys and girls on the street in Philadelphia was observed by Such (as cited in Tannen 1990, 78); the study found a divergence in the use of imperative constructions. Boys made heavy use of imperatives, and girls regulated the level of imperatives by adding adverbs like maybe, perhaps, "or" probably, or using patterns of "let's."

Additional studies are required to identify the verbal communication patterns of interlocutors in classroom collaborative conversations across mixed-gender and same-gender groups, as past studies have used heterogeneous participant samples. Bringing together interlocutors of same-gender dialogue (all-male and all-female) to mixed-gender communication would provide a more detailed portrait of the communicative patterns. This methodological strategy explains gender roles in verbal conduct during interactions with same-sex and opposite-sex. Language, when studied as a socially embedded, gets into discourse analysis. It is shaped by, and shapes, cultural norms, values, social context, and identity. Gender studies take it as a key factor influencing linguistic behaviour. Recent research has moved from essentialist assumptions about gender to dynamic interactional perspectives. Gendered communication is heavily context-dependent and socially constructed (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2019; Talbot, 2019). This paradigm shift is obvious in academic settings, too, where discourse is influenced by gender in line with institutional norms and communicative goals.

Great linguists like Robin Lakoff (1973) and Deborah Tannen (1990) believe that women's language is polite, indirect, and emotionally expressive, and men's language is more direct and assertive. These early models have been highly influential, but contemporary scholars critique their tendency to generalize across contexts. Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory is time-tested as it highlights that speakers strategically adjust their language to maintain and manage face and social relationships. Studies suggest that linguistic choices are shaped by situational factors such as power, audience, and communicative intent, rather than by gender alone (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2021). Empirical studies show that gender influences spoken interaction in educational contexts. Plug et al. (2021) found that women employ more collaborative and supportive communication styles. Men are more likely to adopt assertive, task-oriented approaches. Simon (2021) observes that female university students use expressive language, politeness markers, and hedging devices, whereas male students prefer brevity and directness. More recent studies emphasize that these differences may not be universal but may vary across communicative contexts (Coates, 2022; Litosseliti, 2023). They point out that in classroom discussions, male students dominate turn-taking, while female students prioritize inclusivity and relational harmony.

Politeness strategies and hedging are central features of gendered discourse. Research conducted between 2019 and 2024 indicates that women use positive politeness strategies, such as agreement and supportive feedback, whereas men employ more direct forms of expression (Holmes, 2020; Mills, 2020). Hedging expressions like "maybe" and "I think" are particularly associated with female speech, as they help mitigate assertiveness and maintain interpersonal harmony. Recent findings suggest that hedging is not exclusively linked to gender; it is also influenced by factors such as power relations, confidence, and cultural expectations (Hyland, 2021; Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2022). For example, students may use more hedging when addressing authority figures regardless of gender, highlighting the importance of situational context.

In contrast to earlier assumptions, recent literature suggests that gender differences in informal language use are diminishing. Discourse analytical studies demonstrate that both male and female students frequently use slang and colloquial expressions in peer interactions (Androutsopoulos, 2020; Tagliamonte, 2021). Informal language is increasingly viewed as a marker of group identity and solidarity rather than a gender-specific trait. The rise of digital communication platforms has further contributed to this shift by normalizing informal discourse across genders (Barton & Lee, 2021). Contemporary research often finds no significant gender-based differences in slang usage, supporting the findings of the present study.

Another significant development in recent research is the growing focus on the impact of digital communication on gendered discourse. Recent studies reveal that traditional gender differences are less pronounced in online environments, where communication norms differ from face-to-face interaction (Herring & Dainas, 2022; Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2023). Women adopt more assertive styles in digital contexts, while men use more expressive or informal features, including emojis and abbreviations. These findings suggest that communication style is influenced not only by gender but also by the medium of interaction. Many studies continue to treat digital and face-to-face communication separately, indicating a need for more integrated analyses.

Cultural context also plays a crucial role in shaping gendered communication patterns. Research conducted in South Asia highlights that female speech is often associated with politeness, modesty, and indirectness, reflecting broader societal expectations, while male speech aligns with norms of authority and assertiveness (Rahman, 2021; Shah & Ali, 2022). Globalization and higher education have gradually transformed these patterns, leading to more flexible communication

styles (Mahboob, 2023). Empirical studies conducted in Pakistani universities remain limited, making context-specific research particularly valuable.

Perceptions of gendered communication constitute another important area of investigation. Studies indicate that students believe that men and women communicate differently, even though empirical evidence shows only minor variations (Weatherall, 2020; Baxter, 2021). These perceptions are often shaped by social stereotypes, cultural norms, and media representations rather than actual linguistic behaviour. In most cases, perceived differences are bigger than observed differences, suggesting that beliefs about gender influence communication as much as actual practice.

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain. There is a lack of context-specific studies in Pakistani academic settings, as most research has been conducted in Western contexts. Many studies rely heavily on quantitative methods, with limited use of qualitative approaches such as discourse analysis or analysis of natural conversation data. Insufficient attention has been paid to differences between same-gender and mixed-gender interactions. The role of digital communication in shaping discourse has also been a rather neglected area of research. Most studies also rely on binary conceptions of gender and overlook non-binary identities and intersectional factors. The influence of academic discipline and institutional context on communication styles also remains underexplored.

In short, recent literature demonstrates that gender continues to influence communication patterns. These differences are complex, context-dependent, and shaped by a range of sociocultural factors. The present study contributes to the body of research by providing a perspective from a Pakistani university context and examining both linguistic behaviour and student perceptions, thereby addressing several gaps identified in contemporary scholarship.

Research Objective:

- To compare patterns and variations of gendered discourse and communication style in verbal communication between male and female university students in Pakistan.
- To find out language coping strategies that students use during a conversation and their attitudes towards gender differences in the classroom and in informal discursive contexts in Pakistan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design is quantitative. It examines gendered patterns of discourse in spoken communication among male and female university students through survey research. It collects data on students' communication patterns and interaction styles, as well as their opinions on gender differences in discussion. The target population comprised 27 students from the University of Sialkot, including 13 males and 14 females, undergraduate and postgraduate students. The selection of participants involved random sampling to ensure that all students had an equal chance of being included. The quantitative approach is particularly suitable for identifying trends and patterns in language use and conducting a systematic analysis of communication patterns within the sample population.

Data Collection

Data were collected via a structured online questionnaire. The questionnaire included items related to:

- Communication preferences (face-to-face vs. online)



- Use of informal language
- Use of hedging expressions
- Perceptions of gender differences in communication

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. It included percentages and frequency distributions. The results were presented in tabular form and interpreted descriptively to identify patterns in communication behaviour.

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to examine patterns in students' communication behaviour. Inferential statistics, particularly the independent-samples t-test, were used to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between male and female students in their use of language features such as politeness, hedging, and informal expressions. To serve the research purpose, the significance level for all statistical tests was set at $p < .05$.

Overall Trends

The analysis revealed that:

- A moderate proportion of students preferred face-to-face communication ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.89$), indicating a slight inclination toward in-person interaction.
- 1. The use of slang and colloquial expressions was relatively high ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.81$), suggesting that informal language is common among peers.
- The use of hedging expressions showed the highest mean score ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.72$), indicating that students frequently soften their opinions during communication.

These findings suggest that while students engage in informal discourse, they also maintain politeness through hedging strategies.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Communication Variables

Variable	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Face-to-face communication preference	27	3.76	0.89
Variable	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Use of slang	27	3.93	0.81

Variable	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Use of hedging expressions	27	4.15	0.72

Gender-Based Comparison

To examine gender differences, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female students on key linguistic variables.

- **Hedging Expressions**

Female students reported a higher use of hedging expressions ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.64$) compared to male students ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.70$). $t(25) = 2.21$, $p = .036$. This result indicates a statistically

significant difference, suggesting that female students are more likely to use hedging devices than male students.

- **Use of Politeness Strategies**

Female students scored higher on politeness measures ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.51$) than male students ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.64$). $t(25) = 2.02$, $p = .054$. Although the result is marginally significant, it suggests a trend toward greater politeness among female students.

- **Use of Informal Language (Slang)**

Male students reported slightly higher use of slang ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.74$) compared to female students ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.86$). $t(25) = 1.12$, $p = .273$. This difference is not statistically significant, indicating that both genders use informal language at similar levels.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-Test Results

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	t-value	p-value	Significance
Hedging expressions	3.85	4.42	2.21	.036	Significant

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	t-value	p-value	Significance
Politeness strategies	4.08	4.50	2.02	.054	Marginal

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	t-value	p-value	Significance
Use of slang	4.10	3.78	1.12	.273	Not significant

Perception-Based Analysis (Chi-Square Test)

A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine whether perceptions of gender differences in communication were associated with respondents' gender. $\chi^2 (2, N = 27) = 4.12$, $p = .127$. The result indicates no statistically significant association between gender and perceptions of gendered communication differences. Both male and female students similarly perceive that differences exist.

Effect Size Interpretation

To measure the strength of differences:

- Cohen's d for hedging expressions = 0.84 (large effect size)
- Cohen's d for politeness = 0.68 (moderate effect size)

These values indicate that gender has a substantial impact on hedging behaviour and a moderate impact on politeness strategies.

Reliability Analysis

A Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted to assess the questionnaire's internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha = 0.79. This value indicates acceptable reliability, suggesting that the questionnaire items consistently measure communication behaviour.

Summary of Statistical Findings

The SPSS-based analysis reveals that:

- Female students significantly use more hedging expressions than male students
- Female students tend to use more polite language, though the difference is marginal
- Both genders use informal language at comparable levels
- Students generally recognize gender differences in communication

- The questionnaire demonstrates good reliability

Overall, the statistical results support the hypothesis that gender influences certain aspects of spoken discourse, particularly politeness and hedging strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The survey results outline various trends in communication and interaction patterns among university students. First, regarding comfort in face-to-face communication, 33.3% of respondents agreed that they feel more comfortable speaking in person than over the internet, and 14.8% strongly agreed. However, the largest percentage (48.1%) chose the neutral option, with a few who disagreed (2%) and a few who strongly disagreed (1.8%). These data indicate that, although a considerable proportion of students favours face-to-face communication, a considerable proportion is ambivalent, which might be explained by increasing familiarity with digital modes of communication.

Second, the results show that the usage of slang or colloquial terms is common among students. Overall, almost half of the respondents (48.1%) agreed with it, and 11.1% strongly agreed that they use slang or colloquial language with friends during university studies. On the other hand, 28.6% were neutral, and a small percentage disagreed (11.1%) or strongly disagreed (1.1%). These statistics suggest that informal language has been an essential part of peer communication in the college/university context.

Table 3:

Survey item	Agree	Strongly agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel more comfortable speaking face-to-face than online.	33.3%	14.8%	48.1%	2%	1.8%
I use slang or colloquial expressions while talking to friends at university.	48.1%	11.1%	28.6%	11.1%	1.1%
I use hedging words (e.g., maybe, I think, perhaps) when expressing opinions	74.1%	11.1%	11.1%	2%	1.7%

Third, the results reveal a significant inclination. That is evident with the data, the tendency towards the use of hedging phrases in the process of expressing thoughts. A large majority of the people (74.1%) confirmed, and 11.1% strongly affirmed that they use hedging words such as possibly, I believe, or presumably. The relatively small percentage returned neutrality (11.1%) and disagreement (2.0% and 1.7%). This effect means that students often soften their statements to maintain politeness or reduce assertiveness in academic rhetoric.

The table highlights students' perceptions of gender differences in communication. An interesting majority (81.5%) argues that these differences between male and female speech occur in academic settings; 7.4% believe this difference is only to a small degree, and 11.1% dismiss such a difference. This is evident in the findings, which indicate that most respondents are aware of detectable gendered differences in speaking styles.

Similarly, 81.5% of the respondents said they consider politeness and courtesy when engaging with academics, with 7.4% saying No and 11.1% saying to some extent. Such data

highlight that politeness is considered a noteworthy aspect of communication in the academic environment.

Finally, the respondents were also asked whether there is a difference in how men and women use language when interacting face-to-face verbally. This difference was supported by a plurality (59.3 %), and 3.7% reported a moderate perception, and refuted this conviction (3.7%). These results support the hypothesis that a large percentage of students are aware of gender-related differences in communication modalities.

Table 4:

Questions	Yes	No	To some extent
Do you think male and female students speak differently in academic settings?	81.5%	11.1%	7.4%
I pay attention to politeness and courtesy while speaking in academic interactions.	81.5%	7.4%	11.1%
Do men and women pay attention to politeness and courtesy while speaking in academic interactions?	59.3%	3.7%	37%

CONCLUSION

The study has explored patterns of Gendered discourse in interactions with male and female university students in academic settings, as reflected in their speech. The study has used a quantitative survey methodology to examine students' communication styles, the use of informal language and hedging expressions, and their perceptions of gender-based variance in spoken interaction. The results show that a significant percentage of the students have a moderate inclination toward face-to-face communication; however, the latter percentage is quite low, suggesting that both forms are common in university settings. The statistics also show that informal language and colloquialisms are often used among peers, highlighting that student discourse is informal even in academic contexts. Another important result is that of the common use of expressions of hedging-e.g. maybe, I think, perhaps-in the expression of opinions. This pattern indicates that students commonly use linguistic methods to moderate claims and maintain etiquette in conversations. In addition, most participants reported that their academic communication made them more aware of politeness and courtesy, which means that respectful communication is considered a necessity in university communication.

The findings reveal that the majority of students recognize distinct coarse patterns of speech between male and female counterparts in academic and face-to-face interactions. A significant percentage of respondents identified gender-based differences in communicative modalities, which, in turn, supports the assumption that gender can influence how discourse is structured in oral communication.

The current study concludes that spoken discourse among university student groups is conditioned by factors such as politeness strategies, informal language use, and ideas about gender-related differences. These results contribute to understanding gendered communicative actions in academic contexts and have the potential to inform teachers and researchers about how discourse patterns affect interaction and involvement in university environments. These phenomena should be researchable in future by increasing the number of samples, using observational techniques, or undertaking comparative examination of various institutions.

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