



Men v women: who utters more words a day?



Janet Holmes
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

IN A recent *New York Times* review of a book on language myths, linguist Geoffrey Nunberg commented: "People who readily accept the principles of modern economics, psychology and biology still cling to notions about language that are as antiquated as a belief in physiocracy or leeching."

Among the myths mentioned, the myth that women talk more than men reared up like a multi-headed hydra yet again. It is a myth that is not confined to any particular culture, as the many proverbs about the talkativeness of women testify.

This Chinese proverb is my favourite: "The tongue is the sword of a woman and she never lets it become rusty."

This myth was given new life in Louann Brizendine's contentious book *The Female Brain*.

Brizendine reported that women average 20,000 words a day against just 7000 for men. When this claim was investigated by Mark Liberman from the University of Pennsylvania (described by Nunberg as a "one-man truth squad"), it turned out that Brizendine's figures derived from an unsourced claim in a self-help book.

Nunberg quotes Liberman as saying that "the empirical research shows both sexes using about the same number of words in a day".

Now, I am a great admirer of Liberman. He provides a model of careful research, always checking sources meticulously. But I have to raise my own

questions about such a generalisation.

Questions such as: Who were the subjects of the study? How many people were involved? Where were they recorded? And who did the counting?

It turns out that Liberman was quoting an American study published in 2007, which arbitrarily sampled and analysed data from 396 students who wore a voice recorder for several days.

According to this study, there were no statistically significant differences between women and men: both spoke about 16,000 words a day.

More recently, a Manchester University team recorded conversations over a week and transcribed 50 of them split between men and women in serious and social conversations. Their results showed that British men used more words than women in a day.

The researchers also claimed that men had a weaker command of language in social situations, recycled the same words repeatedly, and paid predictable, unconvincing compliments.

Here I find myself going into bat for the men. What did the participants think? And where exactly did the conversations take place?

In the pub, for instance, people don't expect witty, original contributions to a philosophical discussion. Formulaic and recycled phrases are not only acceptable, they are appropriate. Their function is not to contribute to analysing the political situation, but rather to build rapport and maintain friendships.



Equally, our New Zealand research demonstrates that 80 per cent of compliments by women and men are formulaic and predictable, but there is no evidence to suggest that their recipients considered them insincere or unconvincing.

Both women and men contribute different amounts of talk in different contexts. We all talk more to our friends on topics we are interested in.

In more formal contexts, such as public forums or academic debates, our research indicates that men tend to contribute more than women.

Men asked 75 per cent of the questions in the discussion time in public seminars, for instance, and their questions were prefaced with a long preamble more often than women's.

But our analysis also suggests that there are ways of raising the level of

women's participation. These include a female speaker, a female chair, a majority of women in the audience, and focusing on themes of interest to women.

Reflecting on the basis for the myths around who talks most can thus serve as a useful reminder to consider all the many and varied reasons why different individuals feel able and willing to contribute in different social contexts.

No doubt school teachers are well aware of the range of contextual factors which affect students' willingness to participate in discussion.

Others, too, may find it useful to consider these social influences if they want to hear more diverse voices in public discussion forums.

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