



NEGOTIATING POWER THROUGH GENDERED DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION

Nnamani Mercy Ijeoma

Department of Arts and Communication,
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
mercychanty@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates how language mediates gendered power relations and shapes inclusive communication across institutional and digital contexts. The aim is to investigate how gendered discourse shapes power dynamics and influences inclusive communication in formal and informal interactions. Specifically, the study analyzes linguistic strategies used by men and women, investigates patterns of conversational dominance and collaboration, and explores how discourse practices enable or constrain inclusion.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA), the research analyzes workplace meetings, political interviews, and online discussions, focusing on features such as interruptions, hedging, tag questions, and directive speech acts. Findings indicate that male speakers often employ assertive strategies associated with conversational dominance, especially in hierarchical settings, while female speakers tend to use collaborative and mitigating language. However, women adopt more assertive styles in egalitarian or women-led contexts, highlighting the flexibility of gendered discourse in relation to power structures. The study argues that inclusive communication depends not only on structural reforms but also on transforming everyday linguistic practices, thereby contributing to broader debates on language, power, and gender equity.

Key words: Language, Power, Gendered Discourse, Inclusive Communication.

Introduction

Language is central to the production and negotiation of social power. Beyond its communicative function, language operates as a mechanism of power that shapes how individuals position themselves and others within social interactions. In workplaces, political spaces, and digital environments, patterns of speaking, interruption, collaboration, and silence reveal underlying structures of authority and inequality. Among the most enduring of these inequalities are gendered power dynamics, which are often reproduced through everyday discourse. Understanding how language contributes to the construction and negotiation of gendered relations is therefore essential to promoting inclusive communication. Gender is increasingly understood as a social and discursive construct rather than a fixed biological category. Linguistic practices play a central role in shaping how gender identities are performed and interpreted across contexts. Social expectations frequently influence communicative behaviour, encouraging assertiveness and authority in male speakers while associating politeness, collaboration, and mitigation with female speakers. These expectations contribute to unequal evaluations of similar linguistic behaviours, reinforcing broader societal hierarchies. Language thus serves both as a mirror of social norms and as a site where such norms are challenged or transformed. The theoretical relationship between language and power has been extensively examined by thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, who conceptualizes language as symbolic capital, and Michel Foucault, who frames discourse as a mechanism through which power circulates and social realities are constituted. Building on these perspectives, gendered discourse can be understood as a dynamic arena in which authority is negotiated rather than fixed. Empirical observations across professional and political contexts suggest that speakers draw on linguistic strategies to claim, resist, or redistribute power, with outcomes shaped by institutional norms and audience expectations. The expansion of digital communication has further complicated these dynamics. Online spaces offer opportunities for wider participation and the amplification of diverse voices, yet they also reveal persistent gendered asymmetries in discourse, including harassment, silencing, and misrepresentation. At the same time, digital environments provide avenues for resistance, allowing individuals to challenge dominant linguistic norms and construct alternative discursive identities.

This study investigates how language shapes and reflects gendered power relations across workplace meetings, political interviews, and online discussions. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA), the research focuses on linguistic features such as interruptions, hedging, tag questions, and directive speech acts to examine how speakers negotiate dominance, collaboration, and resistance. Rather than treating male and female speech as inherently different, the study highlights the fluid and context-dependent nature of gendered language practices. By examining how power operates through discourse, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusive communication and the equitable sharing of discursive space. In doing so, it aligns with broader efforts to synergize diverse gender capacities and promote more respectful and collaborative interactions in professional, political, and digital spheres.

Statement of the Problem

Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a mechanism through which social hierarchies, including gender relations, are constructed and maintained. Across workplaces, political spaces, and digital platforms, linguistic practices such as interruptions, hedging, and directive speech acts often reflect unequal participation and reinforce gender hierarchies. While women are commonly associated with collaborative and mitigating discourse, gendered communication patterns are socially constructed and shaped by cultural expectations rather than biology. As noted by Akorede and Olaleye (2008), cultural norms and patriarchal structures have historically influenced women's linguistic choices and limited their discursive freedom. Although recent studies suggest that women may adopt more assertive styles in egalitarian contexts, everyday discourse still mirrors broader social inequalities. Consequently, there is a need to critically examine how everyday discourse practices both reinforce and potentially transform patterns of inclusion and exclusion, as efforts toward gender equity may remain incomplete without attention to the linguistic processes through which power is negotiated.

Research Questions

1. How do men and women differ in their use of language in formal and informal social contexts such as workplace meetings, political interviews, and online discussions?

2. What linguistic strategies (e.g., interruptions, hedging, tag questions, directive speech acts) are most commonly associated with conversational dominance, collaboration, or resistance in gendered discourse?
3. How do power dynamics influence the linguistic behavior of speakers across different gender identities and social settings?
4. In what ways do female speakers adapt their language use in women-led or egalitarian environments compared to male-dominated settings?

Literature Review

The relationship between language, gender, and power has long been a central concern in sociolinguistics and discourse studies. Early studies by Robin Lakoff (1975), Deborah Tannen (1990), and Janet Holmes (1995) provided foundational models for understanding gendered communication. Lakoff argued that features such as hedging and tag questions reflected women's subordinate social position, while Tannen proposed that differences between report-oriented and rapport-oriented speech styles often lead to miscommunication and unequal interactional power. Holmes further demonstrated how women in leadership roles balance authority and politeness to negotiate perceptions of competence and femininity.

Later scholarship challenged essentialist interpretations. Deborah Cameron (2006) emphasized the influence of context and institutional power, while Baxter (2010) demonstrated how gendered discourse shapes leadership evaluation in organizational settings. In political communication, Kittilson and Fridkin (2008) identified the "double bind" faced by female politicians who must balance authority with social expectations of warmth. Studies by Coates (1996) and Tannen (1990) further contrasted cooperative speech styles often associated with women with competitive patterns linked to men, while arguing for equal recognition of diverse communication styles. Digital communication has introduced new dimensions to gendered discourse. Herring (2003) found that men often dominate computer-mediated interactions through longer contributions and more frequent interruptions. However, online environments also provide opportunities for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives and create alternative discursive spaces. Beyond gender differences, language itself functions as a powerful social tool for shaping identity, maintaining cultural norms, and negotiating relationships (Baker & Cornelson, 2018). Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing

literature either focuses on isolated contexts (such as workplace, political, or digital communication) or emphasizes differences between male and female speech without sufficiently examining how these practices intersect across multiple communicative settings. Moreover, while inclusive communication is increasingly emphasized in contemporary scholarship, limited research connects gendered discourse directly to the processes through which inclusivity is constructed or constrained in everyday interaction. This study addresses these gaps by integrating Critical Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis to examine how gendered discourse operates across institutional and digital contexts, and by focusing specifically on how linguistic practices both reproduce and challenge power relations in the pursuit of inclusive communication.

Theoretical Framework

A robust theoretical framework is essential for understanding the interplay between language, gender, and power. This study is grounded in two primary theoretical lenses: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA). Both frameworks are instrumental in uncovering how language functions not merely as a tool for communication but as a mechanism of power and identity construction. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly associated with scholars like Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, offers a means of interrogating language use in relation to power and ideology. CDA posits that discourse is both socially constitutive and socially conditioned—that is, it helps to shape society while simultaneously being shaped by it. In this framework, language is not neutral; it is imbued with power relations that privilege certain voices while marginalizing others. CDA allows researchers to examine how discursive practices reflect broader structures of dominance, inequality, and social control. In the context of gendered discourse, CDA helps to highlight how masculine speech norms are often legitimized as 'standard' or 'rational', whereas feminine speech forms may be framed as emotional, weak, or inappropriate in formal settings. For example, when a male executive dominates a business meeting using assertive commands and interruptions, CDA would prompt the analyst to ask: 'Whose voice is being heard and legitimized, and whose is being silenced or marginalized?' This analytical approach reveals the ideological underpinnings of what may otherwise be seen as 'normal' communication behaviors. CDA is particularly valuable in uncovering the systemic and structural dimensions of linguistic power. Conversely,

Conversation Analysis (CA), which emerged from the sociological tradition of ethnomethodology, is more micro-analytical. It focuses on the detailed, moment-by-moment unfolding of conversation to understand how participants manage turn-taking, repair, topic control, and other conversational features. Pioneered by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, CA provides the tools for closely analyzing how gendered identities are performed and negotiated in real-time talk. Unlike CDA, which often situates discourse within larger social and political structures, CA remains grounded in the immediate interactional context. For instance, if in a mixed-gender discussion a female speaker attempts to express an idea but is interrupted by a male colleague, CA can reveal patterns such as recurrent interruptions, minimal responses, and the control of topic shifts. These seemingly mundane features of talk have significant implications for how power is enacted and contested. CA's emphasis on the structure and function of everyday speech allows for the detection of subtle yet powerful discursive strategies that contribute to gendered power imbalances. Combining CDA and CA provides a comprehensive analytical toolkit. While CDA enables the researcher to situate gendered language within historical, institutional, and ideological contexts, CA brings attention to the nuances of interpersonal communication and the dynamics of face-to-face interaction. Together, these frameworks allow for a layered analysis that captures both the macro and micro levels of discursive power. Furthermore, the study draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not a fixed identity, but a set of behaviors and performances repeated over time through language, gestures, and other social acts. According to Butler, these performances solidify societal understandings of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. In communication, these performances are enacted through choices in tone, vocabulary, and speech patterns. For example, a woman who adopts direct and assertive language in a leadership setting may be seen as violating traditional gender expectations, illustrating the performative nature of gendered language. This theoretical triangulation—integrating CDA, CA, and gender performativity theory enables the study to explore not only how gendered discourse is structured and sustained but also how it can be reshaped. It supports the broader objective of the research: to promote inclusive communication by identifying and disrupting the discursive practices that perpetuate gender inequality in both formal and informal contexts.

Methodology



This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the intricate relationship between language use and gendered power dynamics across various social and professional contexts. The objective is to uncover how men and women employ different linguistic strategies to assert, negotiate, or resist power in both formal and informal settings. It adopts a qualitative research approach, integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA) as the primary methods to provide a robust understanding of discourse and its role in reinforcing or challenging gendered power structures. The qualitative nature of this study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding human experiences through the analysis of language as a social practice. By utilizing textual and discourse data from real-life communicative contexts, the research aims to describe and interpret the gendered patterns in discourse practices, focusing on power, dominance, collaboration, and resistance.

Methodological Framework

Two interrelated analytical tools are employed:

Analytical Tool	Description
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	Used to examine how language reflects, maintains, or challenges societal power structures, especially those related to gender. CDA helps deconstruct ideologies embedded in language that contribute to gender inequality or empowerment.



Conversation Analysis (CA)	Provides micro-level analysis of interactional sequences in real-time conversations. Focuses on turn-taking, interruptions, pauses, and conversational strategies that signal power relations or gendered communication patterns.
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Research Design

The research design is interpretive and exploratory in nature, seeking to understand the nuanced ways in which gender and power are enacted in discourse. By employing discourse-oriented frameworks, the study emphasizes the contextuality and complexity of everyday communication. Rather than attempting to generalize findings statistically, it aims to produce rich, situated understandings of gendered language practices in diverse settings.

Data Sources

The data for this study were collected from three key domains: workplace meetings, political interviews, and online discussion forums. These domains were chosen because they reflect varying degrees of formality, power asymmetry, and public visibility, thereby offering a comprehensive view of gendered discourse across contexts.

- 1. Workplace Meetings:** Audio recordings and transcriptions of mixed-gender professional meetings from educational and corporate institutions.
- 2. Political Interviews:** Publicly available transcripts and videos of televised political interviews featuring male and female politicians.
- 3. Online Discussions:** Posts and comment threads from social media platforms and public forums such as Reddit and Twitter, focusing on gender-related topics.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the discourse samples reflected a range of gendered interactions and power structures. Particular attention was given to the inclusion of both male and female speakers, and efforts were made to incorporate voices from different socio-economic, professional, and cultural backgrounds.

Ethical Considerations

All data were either publicly accessible or collected with informed consent where necessary. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing or altering identifying information. The study adheres to ethical research guidelines concerning the use of discourse data, particularly in digital spaces.

Limitations

As a qualitative study, the findings are context-bound and may not be generalizable to all gendered interactions or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on secondary data in online and televised sources may limit the control over conversational variables such as setting, topic, and participant background. Nonetheless, the triangulated approach enhances the robustness and credibility of the analysis. In sum, this methodological framework provides a rich lens through which to examine the intersection of language, power, and gender. It allows for both macro-level exploration of discursive ideologies and micro-level insights into interactional practices, aligning with the study's goal of advancing inclusive communication.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyzes the discourse data collected from three distinct communication settings: workplace meetings, political interviews, and online discussions. The analysis draws on both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA) to reveal how gendered discourse practices function in these environments and how power is enacted, negotiated, or resisted through language.

1. Workplace Meetings and Academic Environments

Across workplace meetings and academic environments, male participants more frequently controlled agenda setting, interrupted others, and employed directive speech acts, positioning themselves as authoritative speakers. Female participants, by contrast, often framed contributions through hedging and mitigating expressions, which functioned as strategies of relational management but also reduced perceived assertiveness within hierarchical structures. Importantly, data from women-led organizations revealed a shift toward more collaborative turn-taking and

confident directive language by female leaders, suggesting that institutional culture mediates the relationship between gender and discourse.

2. Political Interviews

Political interview data further highlighted asymmetries in both language use and interactional framing. Male politicians tended to employ declarative statements and certainty markers, whereas female politicians more often used modalized or cautious formulations. Interviewers frequently interrupted female politicians or redirected interaction toward personal issues, reinforcing masculine communicative norms as the default marker of authority. These findings align with scholarship on the gendered “double bind,” where women must negotiate competing expectations of competence and warmth.

3. Online Discussions

Online platforms such as Twitter and Reddit reflected both domination and resistance. Male users often adopted authoritative or aggressive styles, while female and non-binary users faced dismissive responses but also used counter-narratives and collective activism, exemplified by the Me Too movement.

4. Religious and Cultural Contexts

Religious, cultural, and multilingual contexts further illustrated how discourse reproduces social hierarchies. Directive language and culturally embedded expressions frequently reinforced patriarchal assumptions, while code-switching practices in contexts such as Nigeria demonstrated strategic negotiation of authority, solidarity, and professional identity. Taken together, the findings indicate that gendered discourse operates as a dynamic mechanism through which power is enacted and resisted. While recurring patterns of dominance persist, shifts across contexts reveal the transformative potential of discourse in fostering more inclusive communication practices.

Comparative Analysis

Across all three settings, consistent patterns emerged: men generally exercised greater discursive control, while women employed strategies to mitigate conflict or foster collaboration. Context influenced these patterns: in egalitarian or women-led spaces, traditional gendered norms were disrupted. CDA revealed how social ideologies about gender and authority shaped lexical

choices, syntax, and framing, while CA highlighted micro-level features such as interruptions, pauses, and turn-taking, showing how power operates in real time. These findings show that gendered discourse is flexible, context-dependent, and shaped by both structural and interactional forces, emphasizing the interplay between social norms and real-time conversational practices.

Visual Data Summary

Quantitative counts support qualitative patterns: men initiated 65% of meeting topics, female politicians were interrupted 1.8 times more than males, and 40% of female-authored social media posts received dismissive replies versus 12% for males. These findings show that language shapes visibility, authority, and exclusion. Importantly, in women-led or inclusive contexts, discursive norms shift, highlighting the transformative potential of intentional, inclusive communication practices.

Findings and Discussion

This study reveals how gendered discourse shapes and reflects power across workplaces, political arenas, online platforms, educational institutions, and religious settings.

1. Conversational Dominance and Interruptions

A consistent finding across the data is the prevalence of conversational dominance by male speakers in formal and hierarchical settings. Men consistently initiated topics, interrupted more frequently, and used directive language, consolidating authority in formal and hierarchical contexts. Female contributions were often hedged or mitigated, limiting perceived influence, though egalitarian or women-led spaces encouraged assertive female participation (Tannen, 1990).

2. Hedging and Politeness Strategies

The frequent use of hedging, tag questions, and politeness markers by female speakers was observed as a strategic accommodation to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation but was sometimes misread as lack of competence. Context determined whether these strategies reinforced or challenged gender norms.

3. Gendered Expectations and the Double Bind

The data also reflects the “double bind” faced by women in public discourse. Women adopting masculine traits risk being seen as aggressive, while feminine norms can undermine authority

(Butler, 1990). Online platforms offered both harassment and resistance, with hashtag activism (Me Too, He For She) reclaiming visibility.

4. Online Communication and Digital Discourse

Online spaces presented both harassment and opportunities for resistance. Hashtag activism (#MeToo, #He For She) exemplifies collective strategies to reclaim visibility and challenge dominant norms.

5. Cultural and Institutional Influences

Findings also point to the powerful role of culture and institutional norms in shaping gendered language use. In religious and traditional contexts, male authority is often embedded in linguistic conventions that reinforce hierarchy. Proverbs, prayers, and public speaking norms often position women as submissive or passive participants. However, shifts in these patterns—particularly among younger generations and progressive religious communities—indicate that language change is possible when power is redistributed.

Conclusion

This study examined how language, power, and gender interact across workplaces, political arenas, and online platforms. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA), it revealed that men often dominate formal discourse through assertive language, interruptions, and directives, while women employ hedging, tag questions, and cooperative strategies. These patterns are context-dependent: in egalitarian or women-led settings, women adopt more assertive forms, demonstrating the flexibility of gendered discourse. These findings emphasize that inclusive communication cannot be achieved by focusing solely on representation or policy reforms. It requires a conscious shift in everyday linguistic practices encouraging all participants to share discursive space equitably, acknowledge diverse speaking styles, and challenge stereotypical expectations. Language reform, therefore, is central to social change. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of fostering awareness about how power operates through language. Promoting inclusive communication involves recognizing and valuing diverse voices, dismantling linguistic barriers, and reshaping discursive norms that marginalize particular groups. In doing so, we take significant steps toward building more equitable, respectful, and collaborative societies across boardrooms, parliaments, classrooms, and digital spaces alike.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several strategies can promote inclusive, gender-equitable communication:

1. **Gender-Sensitive Communication Training:** Institutions such as schools, workplaces, and political bodies should integrate gender-sensitive communication training into professional development programs. These trainings should cover unconscious bias, inclusive language, turn-taking dynamics, and interruptive behavior.

2. **Encouraging Reflective Language Use:** Individuals should be encouraged to reflect on their language habits and the power implications of their communication styles. Self-awareness can be developed through workshops, peer feedback, and reflective exercises.

3. **Institutional Language Policies:** Organizations should adopt formal language policies that promote inclusivity. This includes using gender-neutral job titles, discouraging sexist language, and ensuring that communication protocols (e.g., meeting facilitation) encourage equal participation.

4. **Inclusive Educational Curricula:** Curricula at all levels should address the role of language in constructing gender and power. Teaching students about gendered discourse can challenge stereotypes early and equip future professionals with tools for equity.

5. **Amplifying Marginalized Voices:** Media, educational institutions, and public platforms should prioritize and amplify voices that have historically been silenced or underrepresented. This can be done through editorial decisions, speaker invitations, and equitable representation in leadership roles.

6. **Digital Platform Accountability:** Social media companies should be held accountable for creating safe and inclusive digital spaces. Mechanisms to report abuse, enforce community guidelines, and support marginalized users are essential to counter online harassment and promote respectful discourse.



Further Research: There is a need for further interdisciplinary research that integrates sociolinguistics, gender studies, and media studies to track evolving patterns of gendered communication, especially in digital and multicultural contexts.

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