

WOMEN'S LANGUAGE IN *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY* BBC MINISERIES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify: (1) the features of women's language, (2) the functions of women's language, and (3) the characteristics of the society that is reflected through the use of language by the main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries. The research was descriptive qualitative using sociolinguistic approach supported by some quantitative data. The data of the research were utterances that can be in the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences showing the features and functions of women's language performed by the main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries. The results of the research are as follow. (1) There are nine features of women's language found in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries. They are lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, superpolite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. (2) Five functions of women's language are found in the miniseries. They are to express uncertainty, to get response, to soften an utterance, to start a discussion, and to express feeling when they talk. (3) There are three characteristics of the society that is reflected through the use of language by the main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries, those are: women are placed in an inferior position, women should live based on norms and rules in the society, and women are expected to be weak and helpless.

Keywords: women's language, features, functions, main female characters, *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries

I. INTRODUCTION

People need a language to communicate with one another in order to deliver and obtain a message. Language

can apparently be called as a means to exchange information. The way people use a language is mostly influenced by their society. In line with the idea, Chaika

(1982:2) states that language and society are so intertwined that it is impossible to understand one without the other because every social institution is maintained by language.

Nevertheless, in using a language as a means to communicate with one another, people often use it differently. There are few particular reasons underlying the use of language in a different way and one specific reason is because of gender differences. The attribution of gender commonly distinguishes women from men almost in every single aspect in their life. Those aspects can arise from their work, societies, social classes, and even their languages. In the Western world, for example, there are widely held stereotypes about how talkative women are, and how trivial their talk is (Graddol and Swann in Weatherall, 2002:56). Lakoff (1975:45) also describes a distinctive woman's speech style that conveys weakness, uncertainty, and unimportance. She clearly considers women's language to be inferior to men's language, which she describes as direct, clear, and succinct.

The phenomenon of women's language can be represented in some media such as novel, movie, or miniseries. Novel is considered as a literary work that shows

the portrait of life by describing it into details and a novel mostly uses a language metaphorically. On the other hand, a movie and miniseries are totally different from a novel because they directly portray reality.

One of the miniseries that reflects the phenomena of women's language is a British television drama entitled *Sense and Sensibility*. The story of *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries is adapted from Jane Austen's famous novel in 1811 which is also entitled *Sense and Sensibility*. It tells about two sisters named Elinor and Marianne Dashwood; each of whom represents the title of the miniseries. Elinor Dashwood signifies "Sense" since she is more rational and self-controlled, while Marianne Dashwood represents "Sensibility" by being more emotional. At that time, society took the biggest part in people's life especially for women. Women were inferior and expected to be weak and helpless. Those aspects could be the reasons for women to use their 'language' in order to accomplish the society expectation towards them.

Since the miniseries are depicted from one of Jane Austen's works which concerned mostly with 'women', the researcher is interested in analyzing the miniseries through the features or choices

of words that the main female characters use. In addition, the researcher chooses *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries as the object of her research because the miniseries is adapted from Austen's famous novel in 1811 and it is nominated for Magnolia Award for Best Television Film or Miniseries at the 14th Shanghai Television Festival. Besides, the miniseries attracted an average of 6 million viewers per episode while the cast and crew earned several award nominations for their work as well.

By employing sociolinguistic approach, this research aims to describe the features and functions of women's language and the characteristics of the society that is reflected through the use of language by the main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lakoff (1975:45-80) proposes theories on the existence of women's language. Her journal which is entitled *Language and Woman's Place* has served as a basis for many researches on the subject. She describes a distinctive woman's speech style that conveyed weakness, uncertainty, and unimportance. In her journal, she clearly considers women's language to be

inferior to men's language, which she describes as direct, clear and succinct.

1) Women's Language Features

Lakoff mentions ten features of women's language as in her theory.

a) Lexical hedges or fillers

Lakoff in Speer (2005:23) states that women's use of hedging is evidence for hesitancy, making them appear less assertive than men. In doing so, they avoid creating straightforward statements. Hedges are used as a way of apologizing for saying nothing and filler is used when a speaker is thinking about what he or she is going to say. The examples of the lexical hedges or fillers such as: *you know, sort of, well, you see, maybe, perhaps, in my opinion, I think, etc.*

b) Tag questions

Lakoff (1975:54) mentions that a tag question is used when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim. It also can be used when a person wants to request confirmation or disconfirmation from others. Tag questions are declarative statements that have been turned into a question with the use of a tag. For example "John is here, *isn't he?*"

c) Rising intonation on declaratives

Rising intonation is used mostly when a person wants to seek for response or feedback. Such sentences generally take the form of answers to questions, but have 'the rising inflection typical of a yes no question' (Lakoff, 1975:55). For example "The weather is nice?"

d) Empty adjectives

Lakoff in Mizokami (2003:145) asserts that women are likely to use more empty adjectives. Different from the common adjectives, empty adjectives employ a special effect, such as showing affection and pleasing the ears. For example "Cat is such a *lovely* creature in the world!"

e) Precise color terms

Based on Lakoff (1975:8), women mostly make more precise discrimination than men. She explains that the precise color terms such as *magenta*, *aquamarine*, *lavender*, *etc* belong to the women's vocabulary. In addition, at the lexical level, women use more precise color descriptors (e.g. *mauve*, *beige*, *lavender*) than men (Lakoff in Weatherall, 2002:58). For example "This wall is *mauve*."

f) Intensifiers

Lakoff (1975:55) utters that intensifiers such as *so*, *really*, *totally*, *truly*, *clearly*, *extremely*, and *very*, and qualifiers such as *not exactly* and *a bit*, are more frequently spoken by women than men. It is obvious that those intensifiers are used to emphasize the intentions in which they truly meant. On the other hand, negative intensifiers such as *awfully*, *ridiculously*, *terribly* are used to intensify positive verbs. For example "Really Carol, please don't fuss about it."

g) Hypercorrect grammar

Women's language is well known for its hypercorrect grammar since women tend to be aware of the grammar in using a language. According to Lakoff in Speer (2005:23) women frequently use the hypercorrect grammar and correct forms when they speak rather than men do. Lakoff in Haas (1979:624) asserts that women are consistent in using standard verb forms. For example "Do you mean *lie* instead of *lay*?"

h) Superpolite forms

Superpolite forms are used by women in order to show politeness. Nevertheless, women tend to be less confident in speaking so that they use superpolite

forms. Lakoff (1975:53) states that superpolite forms are usually in the form of the indirect requests and euphemisms. For example “*Would you mind writing it down in a piece of paper?*”

i) Avoidance of strong swear words

Different from men, women tend to use a language in a more appropriate way with proper words. In men’s language, it is normal for men to use swear words to one another because that is the way they communicate. However, in women’s language, women try to avoid using such kind of words especially strong swear words. Lakoff in Mizokami (2003:145) utters that a woman must learn to speak ‘women’s language’ to avoid being criticized as unfeminine by society. Therefore, women are likely using softer swear words in which considered exist on the women’s vocabulary. For example “*Oh fudge, my hair is on fire!*”

j) Emphatic stress

Emphatic means having, showing, or using emphasis on saying something. Stress is used when the women try to signal emphasis on what they are going to say. It conveys a particular meaning when the stress is used in specific ways. “*IT* was a brilliant performance.” The example points

out regarding the kind of performance that is being performed.

2) Women’s Language Functions

Women use a particular language in order to deliver something to others and they usually say it indirectly. According to Pearson (1985:187), there are five women’s language functions as follow.

a) To express uncertainty

Based on Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:167), women’s speech has often been interpreted as indicating uncertainty or unwillingness to take a stand. Basically, women’s language is used to express any hesitation when the women speak, for example in “*Really? I thought you were his girlfriend.*”

b) To get response

Pearson (1985:188) states that women are likely to ask others to do things for them with more words than their male counterparts would use. Different from men who often state directly what they want, women tend to ask indirectly what they want and hope the listeners are able to understand them. An example of the use of the sentence in order to get response is presented in the utterance “*Here is so hot, isn’t it? I thought I saw a window earlier.*”

c) To soften an utterance

Because women are inferior in society and they may also be drowned out by the men, they tend to be more polite or often too polite by softening their utterances when they speak. They use superpolite forms that may soften their language. Moreover, they also use hypercorrect grammar and softer voice tone in order to turn their utterances become more respectful as decent ladies when they talk, for example *“I don’t intend to spoil your happiness, but your father needs you now, I beg you.”*.

d) To start a discussion

When women are about to start a discussion, they frequently use lexical hedges such as: *you know, sort of, well, you see, maybe, perhaps, in my opinion, I think, etc.* Those hedges are considered as the basic words in women’s language and those are applicable in any conversation. An example of the use of hedges is presented in the utterance *“As you know, I’m already his wife now, so I would be a queen to him.”*

e) To express feeling

Generally, women express what they feel easily to others. To create rapport and connection, women will talk more about their feelings, relationship, and people. They will employ more emotional elements in their conversations and expected others to do the same. In expressing their feeling, they sometimes use emphatic stress in order to emphasize their utterances, for example when they say *“Oh my goodness! I think I just saw a ghost.”*.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was a descriptive qualitative supported by some quantitative data. The researcher used the qualitative method in order to describe the phenomenon of women’s language performed by the main female characters (Elinor and Marianne Dashwood) in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries. The approach that the researcher used was a sociolinguistic approach because it is concerned with the use of language in a society.

The object of this research was *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries. The data of the research were utterances that can be in the form of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences showing the

features and functions of women's language performed by the main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries. The researcher herself was the primary instrument in this research, and to obtain the data more accurately, she also used a supporting instrument that is data sheet. In order to get validity of the data, the researcher employed data trustworthiness. Also, the researcher discussed the research with the supervisors and other researchers to validate the data.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research contains 121 data throughout the conversations in the miniseries. There are nine features of women's language proposed by Lakoff found in the miniseries spoken by the main female characters. They are lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, superpolite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. Meanwhile, the functions of women's language suggested by Pearson are found in the miniseries. They are to express uncertainty, to get response, to soften an utterance, to start a discussion, and to express feeling. There are three

characteristics of the society that is reflected through the use of language by the main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries, those are: women are placed in an inferior position, women should live based on norms and rules in the society, and women are expected to be weak and helpless.

1. Women's Language Features Employed by the Main Female Characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries

a. Lexical Hedges or Fillers

Women employ hedges when they talk in order to fill the silence within the conversation or even they use it for giving them time to think about what they are going to say next. The main female characters in the miniseries use this feature 47 times throughout the miniseries. One of the examples can be seen in datum 52.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:

Oh, who could that be?

When Marianne employs the hedge *oh*, she just heard a knock on the door. To fill the silence and start a conversation with others because the previous conversation about Willoughby and the joke of Elinor has ended already, Marianne uses the filler *oh* in her utterance instead.

b. Tag Questions

Tag question is added in women's utterances when they give opinion in the form of declarative sentence but they are not completely sure about the opinion. The main female characters use this feature 4 times in the miniseries. The example is in datum 84 below.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:

That was your hair in Edward's ring, **wasn't it?**

The tag question is used by Marianne when she asks Elinor regarding what she saw when she sees Edward wearing a ring for the first time. She seems unsure if it is Elinor's hair and wants Elinor to confirm it. At the beginning of her utterance, she employs a declarative sentence and ends it by employing a tag question.

c. Rising Intonation on Declaratives

The rising intonation on declaratives uttered by women is indeed in the form of question, yet the structure of the sentence is not grammatically an interrogative sentence. The structure of the sentence with rising intonation is grammatically a declarative sentence, while an interrogative sentence uses its grammar. This feature is appeared 13 times in the

miniseries. One of the examples is shown in datum 1 below.

ELINOR DASHWOOD:

Monday? But that's today.

In datum 1, it can be seen that Elinor seems to be less sure when her mother informs her about the fact that her aunt is going to move to their house in Norland immediately. She seems surprised because she is still in grief about her father's death and has not thought about her aunt yet.

d. Empty Adjectives

Empty adjectives spoken by women are the specific adjectives usually used by women when they try to show what they really feel. The main female characters perform this feature 8 times throughout the miniseries. The example is shown in datum 3 as follow.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:

How can you be so calm about it? Oh, Mother. Don't cry, **dear**.

When Marianne sees her mother is about to cry, she tries to soothe her mother by softening her utterance toward her mother and employing the use of empty adjective *dear* at the end of her utterance.

e. Intensifiers

The use of intensifiers is to emphasize or strengthen the intention of what the women say. When women use intensifiers in their utterances, they try to convince their listeners that they really mean what they say. The intensifiers in the miniseries are appeared 30 times by the main female characters. The example is as follow.

ELINOR DASHWOOD:
No, **really**.

The intensifier *really* in datum 36 is used by Elinor to convince Mrs. Jennings that she really meant what she says and wants Mrs. Jennings to respond to her utterance.

f. Hypercorrect Grammar

The researcher observed that the main female characters in the miniseries still want to be respected by others so that they always use hypercorrect grammar in their conversations. The verb forms that they employ in their utterances are always grammatically correct and consistent throughout the conversations.

g. Superpolite Forms

Superpolite form is mostly used by women in order to show their civility and also it can indicate their indirect requests and euphemisms. Women tend to be

indirect in asking others to do what they want. The main female characters in the miniseries perform this feature only twice. Here is the example shown in datum 87.

ELINOR DASHWOOD:
May I ask if your engagement is of long standing?

She is afraid that her question will show her true emotions. Therefore Elinor uses superpolite forms *May I ask....* in her question in order to soften her utterance toward Lucy as well.

h. Avoidance of Strong Swear Words

Different from men, women prefer to use the words which are more proper to swear. Women see strong swear words as a term that is taboo to be applied by women because it does not show politeness. This feature happens 3 times in the miniseries. The example is in the following datum.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:
And is this what everybody thinks?
How mortifying! Elinor!

In datum 44 above, Marianne seems annoyed when Elinor told her that all people in the neighborhood assume that Colonel Brandon has formed an attachment toward herself. She is surprised when she heard the news and she attempts to express how annoyed she is.

i. Emphatic Stress

The main female characters apply stress in their utterances in order to get attention from others of what they say. The words that they give stress are usually the words in which they want others to understand. This feature occurred 14 times in the miniseries. Here is the example of emphatic stress.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:
Have they no **heart** at all?

In datum 2 above, the word *heart* is stressed by Marianne when she has a conversation with Elinor. The reason underlying Marianne stressed the word *heart* in her utterance is because she attempts to express her annoyed feeling toward the circumstance caused by her aunt's careless act toward them.

2. Women's Language Functions Performed by the Main Female Characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries

a. To Express Uncertainty

Women's utterances in which express uncertainty in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries occur in 34 data uttered by the main female characters. According to the data observed by the researcher, there are three features of women's language which

indicate the uncertainty expressed by the main female characters in the miniseries. The example is shown in the following datum.

ELINOR DASHWOOD:

So do I. And **I think** I prefer your notion of happiness.

When she responds to Edward, she employs the words *I think* in her utterances because she is less sure about what she is going to say. It also shows her hesitation regarding her opinion that she gives to Edward.

b. To Get Response

When women talk, they want others not only listen to them, but also to give response. Women might not say directly what they want to others, they just give any hints to convey their messages instead. In the miniseries, this function appears in 24 data by the main female characters. One of the examples of this feature is shown below.

ELINOR DASHWOOD:

You know, you really can't say things like that at the dinner table, **to their faces**.

In datum 8 above, Elinor's advice toward Marianne is intentionally spoken by adding emphatic stress at the end of her statement because she really wants

Marianne to give her an explanation about what she has said to her aunt in the dinner table.

c. To Soften an Utterance

When women soften their language, it indicates that they want to be respected as a lady as well because they try to be more respectful. This function is performed in 26 data throughout the miniseries. Here is an example of this function.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:

Well, perhaps **dear** Elinor, if I could borrow your yellow gloves.

In datum 57 above, Marianne applies an empty adjective *dear* when she calls Elinor in order to soften her utterance and get what she wants.

d. To Start a Discussion

The lexical hedges or fillers are used mostly when they are about to start a new discussion or even to change the topic of the conversation. This function happens in 7 data uttered by the main female characters in the miniseries. Here is an example of this function.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:

Well, I'm sure it will happen very soon.

Datum 27 shows that the lexical hedge *well* that is used by Marianne in her

conversation with Elinor and Margaret has a function to start a discussion because there is silence in Elinor's utterance before Marianne said something.

e. To Express Feeling

The reason underlying the women express their feelings is because they want to create a connection to each other. They can be so emotional in showing their feelings as well. This function occurs in 30 data uttered by the main female characters in the miniseries. The example is shown in datum 53 below.

MARIANNE DASHWOOD:

Mamma, it's two years old! Look **how faded it is**.

Marianne tries to convince her mother that the dress looks faded by stressing the words *how faded it is* in her utterances in order to express what she really feels.

3. The Characteristics of the Society Reflected through the Use of Language by the Main Female Characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries

If women use women's language in order to be regarded as decent ladies, this suggests that women behave according to norms and rules of the society. The setting in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries is around Austen's era where the women

were treated unequally in the society. At that time, the society took the biggest part in people's life especially for the women. The women did not have the same rights to the men. They were inferior to men and expected to be weak and helpless then they act like a lady in every single time. They also could not inherit the wealth when their father died and only the son who was able to do it. The main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries seem to be so concerned with the norms of their society. They recognize that they are weak in any situation compared to men but they can just do nothing because it is how they are supposed to be in the society. They can just wait for things to happen without doing anything since the men do all the things for them. The norms and rules mentioned before are considered as the reasons for both Elinor and Marianne Dashwood to use women's language in order to accomplish the society expectation because they understand that they live in that kind of society.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions are drawn based on the findings and discussion above.

1. Nine features of women's language proposed by Lakoff are found in *Sense*

and *Sensibility* BBC Miniseries spoken by the main characters—Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. They are lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, superpolite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. This implies that the women in the miniseries concern much about their language. It is due to the norms and rules of the society that place women in an inferior position. Therefore, they employ women's language hoping that they will be regarded as decent ladies.

2. Five functions of women's language proposed by Pearson are found in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries spoken by the main characters—Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. The functions are to express uncertainty, to get response, to soften an utterance, to start a discussion, and to express feeling when they talk. It suggests that the use of women's language by the main female characters in the miniseries is to express indirectly what they want and want to do with others without them saying much.

3. The miniseries are depicted from Jane Austen's era where the setting of the

miniseries is similar to the era when she wrote the novel with the same title. There are three characteristics of the society that is reflected through the use of language by the main female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* BBC Miniseries, those are: women are placed in an inferior position, women should live based on norms and rules in the society, and women are expected to be weak and helpless. Therefore, the main female characters in the miniseries try to follow the rules by mainly using women's language in order to be treated like decent ladies. By doing so, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood hope that they are able to accomplish the society expectation toward them.

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