

## CONVERSATIONAL FEATURES ACROSS GENDER IN *RULES DON'T APPLY*: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

This research is aimed at describing the conversational features performed by the men and women in mixed-sex conversations in *Rules Don't Apply* and describing the motivating factors causing the different usage of conversational features between the men and women found in the movie. This research employed mixed methods: qualitative and quantitative. Therefore, the data were in the form of utterances taken from the conversations of the characters in *Rules Don't Apply*. The theories applied were in the field of gender and communication proposed by Judy Cornelia Pearson (1985) and Deborah Cameron (1985). The results of this research show that there are ten among twelve conversational features which performed by the men and women in mixed-sex conversations in *Rules Don't Apply*. The most appearing feature is silence which occurs 19 times (26.03%) then followed by the use of hedges with 15 data (20.55%). Overlaps cover 11 data (15.07%), controlling the topic 7 data (9.59%), and interruption consists of 5 data (6.85%). Talk time occurs 5 times (6.85%), profanity 4 times (5.48%), and compound request emerges 4 times (5.48%). Vocabulary consists of 2 data (2.74%) and the lowest data is reached by tag question which only occurs 1 time (1.37%). There are two major factors which cause the different usage of conversational features between the men and women in mixed-sex conversations in *Rules Don't Apply* namely subculture and gender role which rank first with 47 data (64.38%) and dominance hierarchies which appear 26 times (35.61%). The findings suggest: (1) there is no certainty which sex performs a particular feature as it depends on the context of the conversation; (2) men are likely to dominate women in a mixed-sex conversation although their social class is lower compared to the women.

**Keywords:** *sociolinguistics, conversational features, Rules Don't Apply*

### INTRODUCTION

Society consists of several aspects where the interaction between men and women is included. In such circumstance, conversation which is done by employing a certain language plays a crucial role. Therefore, language and its speakers hold a substantial part as they affecting one another. The language that certain people use during the conversation, however, differs as they do not employ the same conversational features in their speech. Conversational features here refer to the way people communicate with one another

which are shown through different linguistic features employed in their speeches.

Furthermore, a conversation across gender is the result of interaction between two different sexes: men and women. When people are engaging in a mixed-sex conversation, the diversity of conversational features among the speakers are greater compared to a same-sex conversation.

Pearson's (1985) asserts there are twelve specifics terms of linguistic

features which differentiate men's and women's namely (1) vocabulary, (2) profanity, (3) hypercorrection, (4) hedges, (5) compound request, (6) tag question, (7) questioning, (8) controlling the topic, (9) talk time, (10) interruption, (11) overlaps, and (12) silence.

Vocabulary refers to the choice of words. Graves and Price in Pearson (1985) state that men tend to use more colloquial forms as compared to women. Profanity, on the other hand, is those types of word which function like swearing. Lakoff via Pearson (1985: 183) argues that women tend to avoid using profanity rather than men. In expressing their emotion, women will use 'decent words' in which euphemism is included (Jespersen in Pearson, 1985: 185). Moreover, hypercorrection happens when other speaker reminds the other of the correct form when some errors occur (Lakoff in Pearson, 1985: 185).

Hedges as one of the features are linguistic forms such as *maybe*, *perhaps*, *somewhat*, *in my opinion*, *it seems to me*, *let's see* which modify, soften, or weaken other words or phrases (Pearson, 1985: 186). Pearson further asserts compound request is used when a person wants to employ more polite when requesting for something by adding qualifiers such as *would* and *could*, while tag questions occur when a person makes a declarative statement then follow it with a question related to the same statement.

Furthermore, questioning sometimes occurs in a mixed-sex conversation; however Pearson claims that there is no certainty which sex asks the other more questions (1985: 190). Moreover, people can control the topic of a conversation in several ways such as, by giving minimal responses to the other person's comment,

being silence, and by interrupting other. Pearson asserts that interruptions occur when the person who is listening begins to speak before the last word that could suggest the end of the speaker's statement, question, or comment. Similarly, an overlap occurs when a second speaker begins speaking before the other finishes the statement, but at the same time as the speaker completes the last word.

Additionally, silence occurs when a speaker remains silence after one speaker done talking. Zimmerman & West via Pearson state that women are silent more in mixed-sex conversation (1985: 198). In contrary, talk time is a length of a talk engaged by the speakers. Throne via Pearson points out that there is no certainty which sex talks more (1985: 195).

The differences between men and women conversational features are caused by several factors. Deborah Cameron (1985) asserts there are three major approaches which are used to examine the language discrepancies between men and women in mixed-sex conversations: subculture and gender role, dominance hierarchies, and sexuality and the body which derive from widely different theories in the field of gender and communication.

According to subculture and gender approach, men and women are seen as separate subcultures who speak differently (Ardeners, Maltz and Borker, Smith and Cheri Kramarae in Cameron, 1985: 167). Thus, the discrepancies in their speech are seen as a function of their differing roles. The roles are associated with being male and female which include certain behaviors, for example, masculine aggression and feminine passivity.

Cameron further states that in dominance hierarchies, the aspect which is

used to see the language differences among men and women concerning with the female role: its powerlessness compared to the male role. Additionally, Coates proposes that conversational dominance is achieved when a speaker dominating others in interaction. Linguistic features such as interruption, overlaps, turn-taking, strategies of non-cooperation in talk; talking too much, employing a particular hedges such as you know, and silence are symbol which showing that someone dominates a conversation. Silence, however, is interpreted as powerful and powerless depending on the circumstances of the conversation (2013: 124).

Furthermore, the final approach is based on the claim by many theorists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. They believe that language is related to gender identity through its close connection with the body and sexual desire. According to them, the feminine language of which they speak does not exist yet as they state that such phenomenon is only an ideal goal which is indescribable (1985: 167).

In reference to the theories stated in the literature review, the researcher focuses this study on analyzing the conversational features performed by the men and women in mixed-sex conversations in *Rules Don't Apply*; and describing the motivating factors causing the different usage of conversational features found in the movie. *Rules Don't Apply* is a 2016 American movie starred by Lily Collins, Alden Ehrenreich, and Warren Beatty which is also directed by Warren Beatty himself. Sets in Hollywood in 1960s, the film portrays the story of a young starlet named Marla Mabrey who is employed by Howard Hughes, a mysterious billionaire whom she barely

knows. A conflict arises when Marla has an affair with her driver, Frank Forbes who is also Howard's employee; such affair is prohibited by their employer.

There are some linguistics phenomena that can be analyzed from the movie; for instance, speech acts which occur during the conversations between the characters and the topics involved in the interaction of male and female characters. However, it is impossible to answer all the problems identified since it might take a longer time to conduct the research. Therefore, to make this research more focused, the researcher limits the problem of the discussion. The researcher focuses only on conversational features that are found in mixed-sex conversations.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research applied mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative, but qualitative was mostly used to answer the research problems. Bogdan and Biklen state that qualitative research is presented in a descriptive or narrative form, hence the data being collected are in the form of words or picture rather than numerical data (2007: 5). In line with the previous statement, any good qualitative study always contains rich descriptive data which include people's written or spoken words, their artifacts, and their observable activities despite the theoretical data that are found in the research (Tylor et al., 2016: 162). Quantitative method as the supporting approach, on the other hand, specifies the phenomena in numerical form (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009: 7). Therefore, the data of this research were taken from a writing material which was *Rules Don't Apply* movie script. Moreover, the data findings of the research were presented by numbers and percentages in

the form of a table to support the qualitative interpretation.

Bogdan and Biklen assert that data are the materials that were collected by a researcher. They include interview transcript, field notes, photographs, videotapes, personal documents, memos, and other official records (2007: 117). The data of this study was in the form of lingual units: words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and utterances found in mixed-sex conversations in *Rules Don't Apply*. The context of the data, on the other hand, was the dialogues performed by the male and female character in *Rules Don't Apply*. Therefore, the primary source of the data in this research was the movie entitled *Rules Don't Apply*. Moreover, the secondary data was the script of *Rules Don't Apply* which was retrieved from <http://www.english-subtitles.club/>.

There were two instruments applied in conducting the research. The primary instrument of this research was the researcher herself who was involved in all the research processes which was started from preparing, observing, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. In accordance with the statement, Lincoln and Guba (in Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009: 188-9) state that the most proper instrument in qualitative research is the human who can respond and adapt to the research. Meanwhile, the secondary instrument was a data sheet which was used to help the researcher in categorizing the data.

In collecting the data from the written source, in this case the script of *Rules Don't Apply*, this study applied note taking technique that was used to obtain the data by observing language use; then the researcher conducted the classification or grouping. . Therefore, there are several

procedures of collecting data conducted by the researcher; the researcher watched *Rules Don't Apply* movie completely and thoroughly in order to understand the whole story. Then, the researcher downloaded the transcript of the subtitle from <http://www.english-subtitles.club/>. Additionally, the researcher selected and classified the dialogues which were categorized as mixed-sex conversations. Finally, the researcher finished the data collection by classified the data which were in accordance with the objectives of the research in the data sheet.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007: 157) state that data analysis is the process of transferring the data to obtain the research findings. The analysis involves working with data, organizing them into manageable units, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns. This research used qualitative analysis as the technique of data analysis. Therefore the researcher conducted several procedures to do the analysis; transferring the collected data into a data sheet; categorizing the data using a table containing two different classifications, interpreting the data based on the context to answer the research questions using theories, applying all techniques needed during the analytical process to gain trustworthiness, and describing the data and drawing the conclusion.

Data trustworthiness is applied to ensure the quality of the findings. In order to guarantee the reliability of the data, the researcher employed a triangulation. Taylor et al. describe triangulation as a way of checking out the understanding by considering different sources of data (2016: 93-4). Furthermore, in gaining the trustworthiness of the data in this research, the researcher employed two types of

triangulation which were based on theories and investigator. Triangulation by theory was done by using more than one theory in the process of analyzing the data which were in the field of language and sex differences proposed by Judy C. Pearson, Deborah Cameron, and Jennifer Coates. Triangulation by investigator, on the other hand, was done by involving different researcher to check the credibility of the data. Further, the researcher had peer reviewer from English Literature students majoring in Linguistics as her triangulation partner in which they gave suggestion and opinion during the data checking.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The characters of *Rules Don't Apply* performed ten among twelve characteristics of conversational features during the mixed-sex conversations; hypercorrection and questioning are not found in the movie. Silence reaches the highest level of the occurrence which consists of 19 data (26.03%). Then, it is followed by hedges with 15 data (20.55%), overlaps cover 11 data (15.07%), and 7 data (9.59%) are obtained from controlling the topic. Moreover, interruption and talk time reach the similar level of the frequency with 5 data (6.85%). Similarly, both profanity and compound request have 4 data (5.48%). Furthermore, vocabulary consists of 2 data (2.74%) and the lowest data is reached by tag question which only occurs 1 time (1.37%). According to the findings, there are two majors factors causing the differences in men and women conversational features: dominance hierarchies rank first with 47 data (64.38%); then, it is followed by subculture and gender role which occur 26 times (35.61%) out of the total 73 data. Additionally, factors which caused by

sexuality and the body were not found in the movie.

In the following discussion, the researcher provides several examples along with the explanation regarding the conversational features and their motivating factors. An example of the use of vocabulary by a female character is shown in the following conversation.

### Extract 1

*(This conversation between Marla and Frank happens after Marla met Howard for the first time).*

Frank : So what's he really like?

Marla :A total gentleman! Amazing! I mean, yes, he's not young. But the man's an **incredibly** romantic figure.

(Datum 37)

Frank takes Marla to meet Howard, but he waits outside letting Marla enters Howard's house alone. After the meeting finished, Frank asks her how Howard looks like as he has not met him yet. Marla, then, explains her opinion about Howard's look enthusiastically. From extract 2, it can be seen that a woman tends to be more expressive when describing something as represented by Marla's statement when she talks about Howard. She wants to show that Howard is a romantic figure by adding the adverbial form **incredibly**. The adverbial word that is found in Marla's speech functions to emphasize her opinion that Howard is such a very romantic person.

How a male character expresses a profane language is presented in the following extract.

### Extract 2

*(This conversation takes place in Howard's place where Marla argues with Frank regarding his*

*act which seems to be in Howard's side).*

Marla: Don't be physical with me, Frank!

Frank: Whoever **the hell** is advising you right now ...

(Datum 67)

Marla is visiting Howard to tell him about the matter that just happened between them. Howard, however, thinks that it was all a lie, hence, disappointed by his statement, Marla leaves the place and Frank chases her, but she is starting to blame him for trusting Howard. Marla's act and statement offend him, thus he presumes that there must be someone behind her who is advising her to do such thing. Therefore, Frank shows his anger by employing a profane phrase **the hell** in his utterance which he uses to refer to the person who might has advised Marla.

Below is an example of the use of hedges in a mixed-sex conversation by a male character.

### **Extract 3**

*(The conversation occurs between Frank and Marla when she argues about Stella Starlight).*

Frank : Wait a minute.

Marla : Howard Hughes? Is that who you're waiting for?

Frank : **I think** you should take some time

(Datum 63)

Marla is arguing about *Stella Starlight*, her project with Howard, which she thinks it was nonsense to keep cancelling in making the movie. Then, Frank tries telling her that it takes time and she needs to wait for a while. Marla, however, keeps yelling at him, hence he calms her down by giving his suggestion. In expressing his suggestion, he puts **I think** as the hedge in his utterance. The hedge indicates Frank's

assertiveness that Marla really needs to have some time before taking such action. Additionally, he utters the hedge by stressing his voice to give an emphasis on his thought.

The further example of compound request along with the explanation is presented as follows.

### **Extract 4**

*(The conversation takes place in Marla's house when Frank visiting her).*

Frank : Hello, ma'am. I was informed that your television antenna was defective. I brought over the newest model. And I was wondering **if you would**

Marla : .... (*silent*)

(Datum 42)

Frank comes to Marla's house while carrying her a new television antenna as he was informed that the old antenna is broken. Generally, he talks to Marla in a casual way, but this time he pretends to act as her actual employee in which polite form of talking is employed. To act politely to her, Frank is using compound request **if you would** in his statement when asking Marla's permission to enter her house while pointing the door. Regardless that compound request is associated with women, Frank's act is an indication that it can also be used by men. In this case, however, the compound request that is found in Frank's utterance functions as a joke.

The conversation below shows a tag question that is expressed by a male character.

### **Extract 5**

*(This conversation between Marla and Frank happens in a car where Frank forces Marla to drive the car).*

Marla : What are you doing?  
 Frank : You'll remember. You've got a driver's license, **don't you?**

(Datum 12)

Frank's statement in extract 9 shows his assumption about Marla's ability to drive the car. However, after expressing his declarative statement about Marla, he finishes his statement by adding a tag question **don't you**. This tag question indicates his uncertainty about Marla's driver license. He uses the tag question in his utterance to support his claim since it contains an uncertainty.

An example of topic control by a female character is shown in the following conversation.

**Extract 6**

*(The conversation between Frank and Marla herself in which she initiating the conversation as soon as he gets in the car, where the whole conversation happens).*

Marla : **What do you wanna show me?**

Frank : It's just some acreage I wanna develop. It's for affordable housing.

Marla : **Affordable housing?**

Frank : Yeah. You know, people who aren't rich. They wanna get out of the cities, and into the suburbs. The land I'm gonna show you, the Teamsters own it.

(Datum 13)

Frank takes Marla to a place she has never visited before, hence Marla asks him about their destination as she has no idea about the place. Therefore, Marla initiates the conversation by asking "**What do you wanna show me?**" Then, he explains that the place they are about to go is a land where he is going to develop his business

called affordable housing. Marla, on the other hand, has no clue about such business, thus she asks another question related to his business plan. As a result, Frank explains to her about the affordable housing along the way. Marla's act is categorized as controlling the topic as they keep discussing about the affordable housing until the end of the scene.

The employment of vocabulary by the female speaker which shows her subculture and gender role in mixed-sex conversations is provided in the following example

**Extract 7**

*(This conversation between Marla and Frank happens after Marla met Howard for the first time).*

Frank : So what's he really like?

Marla : A total gentleman! Amazing! I mean, yes, he's not young. But the man's an **incredibly** romantic figure.

(Datum 37)

Marla is very enthusiastic in explaining her first impression about Howard, as it is shown from her expression in extract 2. She uses the adverbial form **incredibly** in her utterance when describing Howard's character. The adverbial word that is found in Marla's speech functions to emphasize her opinion that Howard is such a romantic figure. Marla represents the women role who are viewed to be more expressive as compared to men when describing something.

How a male character expresses a profane language representing subculture and gender role is presented in the following extract.

**Extract 8**

*(This conversation takes place in Howard's place where Marla argues with Frank regarding his*

*act which seems to be in Howard's side).*

Marla : Don't be physical with me, Frank!

Frank :Whoever **the hell** is advising you right now ...

(Datum 67)

The profanity in Frank's statement occurs when he yells at Marla who resists his hand when he tries to hold her. Therefore, he uses **the hell** as the profane words in showing his anger towards Marla also accuses him to be in Howard's side. By employing **the hell** in his utterance, Frank represents his aggressiveness and his tendency to use more offensive words which are associated of being a man.

The example of the use of hedges by a male character is elaborated in the following conversation.

#### **Extract 9**

*(The conversation occurs between Frank and Marla when she argues about Stella Starlight).*

Frank : Wait a minute.

Marla : Howard Hughes? Is that who you're waiting for?

Frank : **I think** you should take some time

(Datum 63)

Frank advises Marla who keeps yelling at him when she is arguing about her upcoming project called *Stella Starlight* by giving her a suggestion. He calms her down by giving his suggestion. In delivering his suggestion, Frank employs **I think** as the hedges for his statement. The hedge represents Frank's assertiveness about Marla's act that really needs to have some time before taking such action. Therefore, it can be concluded that Frank is performing his role as being a man who are viewed as an assertive figure.

The example topic control done by a male character representing dominance hierarchies is presented in the following discussion.

#### **Extract 10**

*(The conversation between Frank and Marla takes place in a car and initiated by Frank himself).*

Frank : **Well, my mom passed away. Actually, I was raised mostly by my grandma.**

Marla : And your dad?

Frank : Well, he, kind of, took off before she passed away, so... I think every few weeks, I'll probably be able to go back and see my grandma and my girl. I grew up across the street from, actually, my fiancée. Right now she takes care of her father's dog kennel.

(Datum 4)

Frank initiates a topic of a conversation by telling Marla about himself as there is a silence between them. Frank is portrayed as the person who controls the topic since he is the initiator of the talk and the topic remains the same until the end of the conversation. His attempt to control the topic is categorized as dominating the talk since it symbolizes the power that he holds to direct Marla during the conversation.

Furthermore, the interruption done by a female character showing dominance hierarchies is presented in the following conversation.

#### **Extract 11**

*(The conversation occurs when Frank and Marla are arguing about her upcoming movie entitled "Stella Starlight").*

Marla : Stella Starlight is a really, really stupid title for a really stupid movieBut not

nearly as stupid as I am for thinking he'd ever make it.

Frank : I ...

Marla : **First, he gives me a lot of junk about how great I am.**

(Datum 61)

The conversation shows that both Frank and Marla yell at each other as they arguing about her upcoming movie called *Stella Starlight*. In the middle of Marla's argument about the movie, Frank tries to respond to her opinion and starting to say **I**, but he fails as he is interrupted by her another argument. Marla's act towards Frank is called as an act of interruption since she is supposed to be the person who is listening. In contrast, she begins to speak in order to tell him the reasons she calls herself stupid, hence Frank could not finish his statement. The interruption done by Marla represents her power in dominating Frank in the conversation.

An example of overlap done by a male character in dominance hierarchies is shown in the following extract.

**Extract 12**

(*Frank and Marla arguing about the kissing that was just happened*).

Marla : I'm not some disgusting tease of a **virgin**...

Frank : **You've done nothing wrong!**

(Datum 45)

When Frank is going to leave Marla's house, she starts to argue the kissing that just happened to them. Marla thinks it was her mistake to do such thing. In contrary, Frank convinces her that it was not her fault by overlapping her and saying "**You've done nothing wrong!**" Frank's act of convincing is categorized as an act of overlapping as he begins to talk at the same time as Marla utters the word *virgin*

in her last statement. The overlaps done by Frank here indicates his power to control Marla's thought that she did nothing wrong.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusions

The characters of *Rules Don't Apply* performed ten among twelve of conversational features during the mixed-sex conversations. Hypercorrection and questioning, however, are not found in the movie since the characters in *Rules Don't Apply* do not utter the words that can be categorized as both hypercorrection and questioning. Silence reaches the highest level of the occurrence which consists of 19 data (26.03%) in which 12 data emerge from men's speeches and 7 data are employed by the women speakers. It shows that although women are viewed to be silent in mixed-sex conversations compared to men, they do not play static role. Thus, the findings depict that there is no certainty which sex performs a particular linguistic feature as it depends on the context of the conversation.

Furthermore, there are two out of the three major factors which cause the different usage of conversational features between the men and women in mixed-sex conversations namely subculture and gender role, dominance hierarchies, and sexuality and the body. However, sexuality and the body as one of the approaches is not found in this research. The findings show that two linguistic features proposed by Judy C. Pearson namely hedges and silence as the factors causing the differences have different function regarding the circumstances of the conversation. Therefore, both hedges and silence emerge in subculture and gender role, and dominance hierarchies. Men tend

to employ the silence to show their power; women, on the other hand, have a tendency to be silent when they feel powerless. Similarly, men employ hedges in their speech as they hold power towards the women, while women use hedges to perform their role as a woman who tends to soften their speech. In addition, dominance hierarchies which rank first with 47 data (64.38%) out of the total data are the indication that men are likely to dominate women in a mixed-sex conversation although their social class is lower compared to the women.

### Suggestions

In reference to the findings of the research there are several suggestions proposed by the researcher which can be given to the some parties. The future researchers might conducting their analysis of conversational feature differences by employing other approach such as discourse analysis. They can also use other resources as the object of the research since the conversational features differences between men and women can be found in other field such as novel, comic, television shows, etc. Furthermore, they might provide the third objective by analyzing the setting of the movie which caused the differences between men and women conversational features as this phenomenon was not explained by the researcher of this study. The researcher suggests the English students to extend their knowledge concerning on conversational differences found in men and women's talk since such phenomenon happens in daily life. Moreover, it is suggested for those who want to conduct any research regarding language and gender as their theme to provide as many references as possible before starting the

research; since it is hard to find the theories which can be applied to answer all the research problems related to the discrepancies between men and women conversational feature. Therefore, they will not take longer time to finish the research.

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