The Use of Women's Language Features by Kamala Harris in the Vice-presidential Debate

Britney C. Joseph[1] Lina P. Hartanti[1,*] Ayunita Leliana[2]

[1,2]*State University of Surabaya, Indonesia*
[*]*Corresponding author. Email:* *linapurwaing@unesa.ac.id*

ABSTRACT

The number of women attaining leadership positions in governmental institutions is significantly increasing. The growth of recognizing women in the political sphere prompts the need for this paper to explore how women maintain power and authority on the *'floor'* through their language choices. To that extent, this study aims to analyse Lakoff's women's language features used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate 2020 to reveal how she, as the first American woman-of-colour senator, maintains a powered speech through her linguistics choices. The qualitative research method is utilized, with the discourse analysis approach to explore how language use and its context construe meanings of social reality. Two primary sources are used in data gathering: vice-presidential debate transcription from *rev.com* and the vice-presidential debate video from NBCNews on YouTube. The result shows five out of ten women's language features used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debates, consisting of 11 (16%) lexical hedges, 8 (11%) empathetic stress, 23 (33%) hypercorrect grammar, 1 (1%) super polite form, and 27 (39%) intensifier as the most dominant feature. However, there are no tag questions, rising intonation on declarative, empty adjectives, precise colour terms, and avoidance use of swear words.

Keywords: Women's language features, Vice-presidential debate, Kamala Harris.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a means of communication. It is the product of culture representing how communication differs among individuals from disparate speech communities. Social factors and cultural norms are innate determinations of how languages work in a society. One vast dichotomy lies in how women and men speak differently. Formerly, theoretical sociolinguists have claimed that women tend to be more linguistically polite and status-conscious than men. It is due to the strict social system that exclusively demands women to be more aware of maintaining an appropriate speech [1], [2], [3], [4]. Unfortunately, these particularized regulations of speech manner created a gap between the power women and men hold. Lakoff [4] introduced ten women language features representing powerlessness attached in the way women use language. For instance, women tend to use tag questions such as '*right?*' in asserting an opinion due to the lack of power in the freedom of speech which urges them to seek others' approval as a way to omits their uncertainty of whether or not their expression is acceptable in society.

Society generally perceives men as more suitable with power than women and that it is conventional for men to hold power but not for women as it makes them less feminine [5], [6], [7]. This perception leads society to normalize excluding women from fully engaging in political realms. As a result, women have gone through an underrepresentation in politics for several decades due to the inadequate opportunities that prevent them from striving for power [8]. However, in the last few years, the number of women attaining leadership positions in governmental institutions has undergone a significant increase. For instance, in 2016, Hillary Clinton ran for president as the first female nominee for the office. She previously served as the first female senator and the U.S. secretary of state. In perpetuity, Kamala Harris succeeded in gaining the position as the 49th United States vice president in 2020 [9]. Therefore, due to the drastic change in women's participation in the parliamentary, this study intends to find out how female politicians maintain a powered speech in political debates by utilizing Lakoff's women's language features theory [4].

Several studies have formerly carried this topic. First, Jones [10] examines whether or not Hillary Clinton talked 'like a man' in navigating her political leadership by conducting a quantitative textual analysis of 576 interview transcripts and debates from 1992 until 2013. The result shows that her linguistics style suggests her language grew more masculine over time as her power in politics expanded. Second, Siregar & Suastra [11] explore the women and men linguistics features used by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential debate by utilizing language features theory from Lakoff's [4] and Coates [12]. The results found eight out of ten women's language with empathetic stress as most dominant, and three out of four men language features with great attention to detail as most occurring. Third, Khalida et al. [13] test the hypothesis that communicative behavior is gender-specific and occurs due to the choice of implicit and explicit linguistics speech markers that present the feminine features in political discourse. The result supports the hypothesis that gender factors influence communication processes compared to other extralinguistic factors.

Unlike the previous studies that emphasize women's language masculinity in formal speeches [10]; men and women's linguistics features in presidential debates [11] and influences of gender factors in political discourse [13], this study focuses on the women's language features used by Kamala Harris in delivering her speeches in the vice-presidential debate 2020. Moreover, this work selects Kamala Harris as the study's object due to her background as an active female politician and the first Black-South Asian female to lead as the vice-president in the United States. That is to say, being both a woman and a person of color as the U.S. vice president has succeeded in depicting that discrimination against gender and race in governmental institutions is one step closer to overcome. Therefore, this study analyzes Kamala Harris's utterances through Lakoff's women's language features. It tries to find out the women's language features used by Kamala Harris in the vice presidential debate.

1.1. Language and Gender in Sociolinguistics

Language and Gender in Sociolinguistics predominantly concern how varieties of speech correlate to a particular gender or social norms and how they emerge a gendered language use. Cultural norms believe gender emphasizes different social roles and responsibilities, which results in how men and women use contrasted language [14]. For instance, men tend to be more assertive, direct, and confident in using language as they are naturally privileged with power and culture. In contrast, women are more likely to preserve politeness and exclude 'manliness' speech forms in maintaining their language [1], [2], [3], [4]. It is due to the social stratification that commonly

stereotyped women as more inferior than men; thus, expected them to manage their speech as politely as they could to prevent offending men.

1.2. Language, Gender, and Power in Politics

Language in its use has also performed as an agent to disclose power and authority. Cultural norms and expectations toward how each gender must behave in practicing their speech exemplify how power manifests itself in languages [5]. As men are naturally privileged with domination, they tend to use language assertively and confidently, unlike women, who must weaken their voices to fit the social standards. This long-established notion has led to biases fortifying gender hierarchy, resulting in unequal opportunities for women in specific situations where those who possess authority can control language and discourses in society. Politics, to name one, is the area that manipulates language in retaining power, and due to this, women are often having a hard time gaining a position in politics.

1.3. Women's Language Features

Women are hereditarily born under sexually biased stereotypes where society expects them to talk like a 'lady.' This usually depicts over-politeness, lack of confidence, and powerlessness in using language. Due to this, Lakoff [4], in her influential *Language and Woman's Place,* initiated ten women's language features to reveal linguistic disparities in the way women's language is different from men up in all levels of the English grammar as presents below.

1.3.1. Lexical Hedges and Fillers

Lexical hedges are words that women use as a device to express their uncertainty or lack of confidence toward the information they imply. Usually, lexical hedges arise when women are not sure whether their assertion is acceptable to others. However, it also can occur as a form of politeness. In correspondence, Holmes [15] adds that women use lexical hedges as a tentative function to lessen the force of the proposition. Some examples of lexical hedges are '*I think,*' '*you know*,' '*kind of/kinda,*' '*sort of,*' '*well,*' '*you see.*' Further, lexical hedges can also occur in the form of verbal fillers where the speaker usually uses as a way to fill speech pauses, for instance, [uh], [uhm], [aaa].

1.3.2. Tag Questions

Tag questions in their usage and their syntactic shape are midways between unequivocal assertions and a yes-or-no question. They are less assertive than the former but more confident than the latter. Lakoff [4] states that one might use tag questions when they lack knowledge of their claimed statement and thus need the

interlocutor's reassurance to reduce the uncertainty of their expression. An example of tag question is '*The war started ten years ago, didn't it*?'. However, in some cases, tag questions can also occur when the speaker intends to make small talk, for instance, '*He got trouble again, didn't he?*'

1.3.3. Empathetic Stress

Empathetic stress is an enhancing device to emphasize a more definite meaning of a particular word in an utterance. Holmes [1] states that women use empathetic stress more than men to strengthen the meaning of their utterance to preserve a more convincing expression to the interlocutor. In line with this, Lakoff [4] claimed that women upraise their utterances in hope so that others will seriously pay more attention to their utterances, which reflects women's lack of confidence. An example of empathetic stress is '*It is such a BEAUTIFUL place.*'

1.3.4. Rising Intonations

Women use rising intonation in declarative sentences to indicate an unwillingness to express the information assertively [4]. In doing so, women tend to stress the tone at the end of the utterance to invite the interlocutor's confirmation by showing that discussions are left open in a non-forceful way. It is pretty similar to tag questions in which it falls under the category of a yes-or-no question; however, rising intonation stresses the end of the utterance's tone. For instance, the utterance '*It is morning already?*' is not a question but rather a statement seeking reassurance from others to gain confirmation.

1.3.5. Empty Adjectives

Empty adjectives commonly occur neutrally in men and women; however, women emphasize more advantageously using empty adjectives in managing their expressions to express admiration and show an emotional affinity to the interlocutor [4]. Empty adjectives traditionally come into two types: neutral adjectives such as *excellent*, *terrific*, *fantastic,* and women-only adjectives such as *adorable*, *sweet*, *cute*. Women can use both neutral and women-only within these two categories since women are stereotyped as more expressive toward their emotional feelings. In contrast, men can only use neutral adjectives to save their masculinity.

1.3.6. Precise Colour Terms

Precise color terms predominantly occur in women because they generally are more detail-oriented and specific in recognizing things. Women often use color-specific terms to show that some colors hold their interest. They also use color-specific terms to show others that they are good in their realm. Further, Lakoff [4] adds that women have a more extensive vocabulary on colors' names than men; and that men are generally more color-blind when naming colors. For instance, men would perceive the color purple simply as 'purple,' but women would specifically go further into its shades and hue, for instance, 'purple' into *'mauve, magenta, and lilac.'*

1.3.7. Intensifiers

Intensifier is a linguistics term for a modifier that functions to boost the intensity of a word. In line with this, Holmes [1] states that women often use intensifiers more to strengthen the use of certain words in their utterances. The use of intensifiers indicates that the speaker has paid more attention to specific terms, enabling the interlocutor to better grasp the emotional sense in the message. However, although men can also use intensifiers, women frequently use them more. Some examples of intensifiers are *so*, *very*, *really*, *terribly,* and so on.

1.3.8. Hypercorrect Grammar

Women and men use different quantities of the same forms [1]. It means that women tend to maintain grammatically correct words to lower their position considering that they have subordinate status in society which requires them to be more linguistically polite than men. Lakoff [4] identifies hypercorrect grammar as the tendency to use more standardized forms and pronunciation. Women tend to maintain the final *g* sound in ŋ more than men; for instance, *going* instead of *goin'*.

1.3.9. Super Polite Form

Women's language features indicate how women prioritize politeness in managing their language [4]. As a way to disclose that, Lakoff [4] identifies super polite forms in women's language as extensive use in euphemisms; indirect expressions in ordering a request to decrease bluntness so that they could save their faces and the interlocutors'. For instance, '*please close the window'* instead of '*close the window!'* By considering such terms, women succeeded in preventing the harshness and strongness of the command expressions.

1.3.10. Avoidance of Strong Swear Words

Besides intonation, vocabulary, and grammar, gaps of language rules in women and men also differ in how they maintain the use of extensive swear words [1]. Given that society has generally perceived swear words as vulgar language; thus women tend not to adhere to it to conserve politeness and their 'lady-like image [15]. Therefore women often restrict using swear words in all

particular social contexts. Some examples of avoidance of strong swear words are the use of '*oh my goodness*' or '*gosh.*'

2. METHODS

This study utilized the qualitative method to emphasize a holistic description of a particular phenomenon [16], with the discourse analysis approach considering that this work focused on construing the meaning of written and spoken words related to their social context. The instruments used in gathering and analyzing data are the human instrument and a tabulation table. Two primary data collecting sources were the vice-presidential debate transcription from rev.com and the vice-presidential debate video from NBC News on YouTube. The data analysis technique consisted of four steps: skimming the data, interpreting, calculating the frequency, and presenting the data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of women's language features found in Kamala Harris's speech in the vice-presidential debate. The data found five out of ten women's language features used: lexical hedges, empathetic stress, super polite form, hypercorrect grammar, and intensifiers, as exemplified in Table 1.

Table 1. Women's Language Features

No	Women's Language Features	Number of Features	Percentage
1	Lexical Hedges and Fillers	11	11%
2	Tag Questions	-	-
3	Empathetic Stress	8	11%
4	Rising Intonation on Declarative	-	-
5	Empty Adjectives	-	-
6	Precise Color Terms	-	-
7	Intensifiers	27	39%
8	Hypercorrect Grammar	23	33%
9	Super Polite Form	1	1%
10	Avoidance of Swear Words	-	-
Total		70	100%

This section presents a discussion comprising interpretations of the above results by correlating the evidential data with the provided literature review to discover the intended impact of the present research.

3.1. Lexical Hedges

The data found 11 (16%) lexical hedges used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate. According to [4], women use lexical hedges to indicate that they are uncertain with the words they deliver or soften the proposition's force. Below is the example of the use of lexical hedges by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate:

(1) "**You know**, Joe and I were raised in a very similar way. We were raised with values that are about hard work, about the value and the dignity of public service, and about the importance of fighting for the dignity of all people.

(2) And I **think** Joe asked me to serve with him because I have a career that included being elected the first woman District Attorney of San Francisco."

In datum (1), Kamala Harris is asked by the moderator, Susan Page, whether she had reached an agreement with Joe Biden about safeguards regarding the issue of presidential disability. At the beginning of her response, Kamala uses the lexical hedge, '*you know,*' a term women commonly used as a hedging device to express uncertainty and hesitancy in expressing a confident speech [4]. However, Holmes [15] states that the use of '*you know*' can be either uncertain or confident. In this case, it was evident that Kamala was certain in using the expression to positively reassures the validity of her experiences with Joe Biden to the addressee.

In datum (2), '*I think*' is established. According to [4], the use of the lexical hedging device '*I think*' may serve as two functions, deliberative and tentative. Deliberative refers to confidence expression as it adds weight to the utterances. On the other hand, tentative refers to uncertain expressions as it aims to soften the force of the proposition. Although deliberative predominantly occurs among men, it is not too 'uncommon' that some women use it. Kamala Harris, for instance, is one of them, as it implies from the way she brought up her background with Biden confidently.

3.2. Empathetic Stress

The data shows 8 (11%) empathetic stress used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate. Women employ empathetic stress to strengthen the meaning of an essential word so that their interlocutor would pay more attention to that word [4]. Thus, people would grasp the meaning more seriously. Below is the example of the use of empathetic stress by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate:

(3) "And it is because of the **CATASTROPHE** and the failure of leadership of this administration."

In datum (3), Kamala Harris states that half of the younger generation in America is currently in a monetary crisis due to the catastrophe and failure of the current administration's leadership. However, in expressing the statement 'and it is because of the catastrophe,' Kamala stresses the tone of the word 'catastrophe.' Lakoff [4] states that women emphasize their propositions by highlighting salient terms (noun, verb, adjectives) with a high-pitched note. Therefore, Kamala's intention in stressing the noun '*catastrophe*' is to strengthen its emphasis so that the audience would have known how awful the catastrophe caused by the leadership administration is and that it has been the cause of the catastrophe young generation's economic breakdown.

3.3. Intensifiers

The data shows 27 (39%) intensifiers used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate. According to [4], women use intensifiers to strengthen some words in their utterances and put more emotional sense into their words. In addition, intensifiers perform as a boosting device to strengthen the proposition [1]. Below is the example of the use of intensifiers by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate:

(4) "Absolutely. And that's why Joe Biden has been **so incredibly** transparent. And certainly by contrast that the president has not, both in terms of health records, but also let's look at taxes."

In datum (4), Kamala Harris is asked by the moderator, Susan Page, whether voters have the right to know more detailed health information about the presidential candidates, especially the presidents. In response, Kamala stated that, indeed, voters have the right to know. Kamala then follows up how Joe Biden has been incredibly transparent about letting his voters know about his health condition. In uttering her statement, Kamal employed the adverb 'incredibly' before the word 'transparent' as a boosting device to strengthen her claim so that the audience would understand how Joe has been very frank and open to his voters regarding his health track.

3.4. Hypercorrect Grammar

The data shows 23 (33%) hypercorrect grammar used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate. According to Lakoff [4], women must use a more standardized language and accurate pronunciation due to their subordinate role. In most cases, women use standard language forms to respond to the overt prestige

[17]. Below is the example of the use of hypercorrect grammar by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate:

(5) "The American people **have had to sacrifice** far too much because of the incompetence of this administration.

(6) And I believe strongly that first of all, we are never **going** to condone violence.

In datum (5), Kamala Harris utilized hypercorrect grammar as seen in the use of perfect present tense in the sentence 'have had to sacrifice,' whereas it could have been just 'had sacrificed.' Kamala chose to use such precise grammar forms as the context of her speech is momentous and thus invites her to be very formal in delivering her utterance. Hypercorrection in women's language also occurs in how consistently women pronounce words 'correctly.' Commonly wide studied English variable studied under this assumption is the variation of [ŋ] and [n] in suffix /ing/. As seen in datum (6), Kamala pronounced the word 'going' correctly with /ing/ as in [ŋ] concerning context and formality.

3.5. Super Polite Form

The data shows 1 (1%) super polite form used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate. Women use super polite forms as euphemisms or indirect requests to prevent tensions with their interlocutors [4]. Below is the example of the use of super polite form by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate:

(7) "He interrupted me, and I'd like to just finish, **please**."

In datum (7), the moderator, Susan Page, asked Kamala Harris to respond to the same question asked to Mike Pence, which is, "should Americans be braced for an economic comeback that is going to take not months, but year or more?" In responding to the question, Kamala was interrupted by Mike Pence about four times, where she then simultaneously pleads for him to stop by saying, "Mr. Vice president, I am speaking, I am speaking." However, Mike Pence did not bother to mind her and keep interrupting her session. Thus, in consequence, Kamala invaded Mike Pence's turn of speaking by politely requesting the moderator Susan Page as seen in the use of '*please*' to preface a request to subordinate, which was done for politeness.

4. CONLUSION

In conclusion, this study found five out of ten women's language features used by Kamala Harris in the vice-presidential debate 2020. The total number of linguistic features is 70 consisting of 11 (16%) lexical hedges, 8 (11%) empathetic stress, 23 (33%) hypercorrect grammar, 1 (1%) super polite form, and 27

(39%) intensifiers. However, there are no tag questions, rising intonation on declarative, empty adjectives, precise color terms, and avoidance use of swear words. The supporting evidence found in the data section shows that Kamala maintained a decent amount of women's language features and consistently managed her speeches assertively to represent her confidence due to her status and role as a female politician preserves leadership traits. Moreover, as this study provides a basis for women's linguistic choices in political discourse, it expects to indicate directions and references for further research in this area.

REFERENCES

[1] J. Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 4th Ed, New York: Routledge, 2013.

[2] P. Brown, "How and Why are Women More Polite: Some evidence from a Mayan Community," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. S. McConnel-Giner, R.Borker, N. Furman, Ed. Praeger Publishers. 1980, pp. 111-136.

[3] D. Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*, New York: Oxford, 1996.

[4] R. Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place," in *Language in Societies*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 637-657.

[5] R. Lakoff, "Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting "Women" and "Power" in the Same Sentence," in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, J. Holmes and M. Myerhoff, Ed. MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 161-178.

[6] L.A. Rudman, and S.A. Goodwin, "Gender Differences in Automatic In-group Bias: Why Do Women Like Women More Than Men Like Men?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, pp. 494-509, 2004, DOI: doi:10.1037/0022-3514.87.4.494

[7] L.A. Rudman, "Self-promotion as a Risk Factor for Women," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, pp. 629-645, 1998.

[8] J.L. Lawless, and K. Pearson, "The Primary Reason for Women's Underrepresentation? Reevaluating the Conventional Wisdom," *Journal of Politics*, pp. 67-82, 2008, DOI: doi:10.1017/S002238160708005X

[9] Women in politics: A timeline | ShareAmerica. Accessed May 15, 2021. https://share.america.gov/women-in-politics-timeline/

[10] J.J. Jones, Talk Like a Man: The Linguistic Styles of Hillary Clinton, 1992-2013, Perspectives on Politics, 2016, pp. 625-642. DOI: doi:10.1017/S1537592716001092.

[11] A. Jamangantar Siregar, and I.M. Suastra, Women and Men Linguistic Features in the First Presidential Debate Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016, Udayana Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2020. DOI: doi:10.24843/ujossh.2020.v04.i01.p01.

[12] J. Coates, Women, Men, and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language, London: Routledge, 2004.

[13] N. Khalida, Z. Sholpan, B. Bauyrzhan, and B. Ainash, Language and Gender in Political Discourse (Mass Media Interviews), Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2013, pp. 417-422. DOI: doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.079.

[14] P. Eckert, Language and Gender, United Kingdom: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

[15] J. Holmes, Functions of You Know in Women's and Men's Speech, Language in Society, 1986, pp. 1-21. DOI: doi:10.1017/S0047404500011623.

[16] J.R. Fraenkel, N.E. Wallen, and H.H. Hyun, How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education, Eight Edition, Boston: McGraw-Hill,2012.

[17] W. Labov, The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of Linguistic Change, Language and Variation Change, 1990, pp. 205-254. DOI: doi:10.1017/S0954394500000338.