



# Analysis of the "reversal" Phenomenon of Male and Female Gender Language and Stereotypes in Film and Television under the "Principle of Politeness"

## Take "Everything Everywhere All at Once" as an Example

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**Abstract.** With the feminist movement and the development of feminist theory, the gender language differences and gender temperament of modern men and women have changed greatly compared with traditional stereotypes. Inclusiveness has also increased. In recent years, the portrayal of female and male characters in movies has also reflected this change. There are even phenomena of gender language differences between men and women and gender temperaments "reversing" each other. The heroine's and her husband's shaping in "The Transient Universe" manifest this phenomenon. This study examines the portrayal of female and male characters in the movie "The Transient Universe" and explores the phenomenon of gender language differences and reversed gender temperaments. Through analyzing the language and personality characteristics of the heroine and her husband, as well as people's reactions, it becomes evident that the heroine exhibits characteristics more aligned with "masculinity" and "masculine language," while her husband displays contrasting qualities. The film portrays a certain level of acceptance towards these characteristics, reflecting the trend of social aesthetic diversification and the breaking of traditional stereotypes.

**Keywords:** gender language differences、 principle of politeness, femininity

## 1 Introduction

With the development of the economy, social structure transformation, ideological and cultural integration, and progress of feminism, women's social status and their role in production and labor have significantly improved. However, despite the advancement of feminist movements, women's discourse power and gender language differences still exist as a means to challenge stereotypes associated with "lady" language and femininity. This phenomenon is even depicted in exaggerated lines and actions in certain film and television media to highlight the breaking of gender language stereotypes.

"The Transient Universe," which won multiple Oscars on March 12, 2023, including Best Picture and Best Actress for Michelle Yeoh, has been subject to controversy regarding "political correctness" due to its exaggerated and comedic plot, thematic and

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character choices, and the identity of its Chinese lead actor. Existing research on "The Transient Universe" mainly explores oriental philosophy through deconstruction, transcending the "other," or discusses cultural differences between the East and the West, the mother-daughter relationship, or existentialism in the multiverse opposing modern society's nihilism. However, limited studies focus on the language portrayal of female and male characters in the film. Additionally, existing analyses of gender language differences primarily emphasize the conformity of men and women to language stereotypes, showcasing discrimination against women or highlighting women's struggles, while neglecting instances where women and men break these stereotypes in terms of gender language.

This article aims to analyze the current "reversal" phenomenon of gender language between men and women using Lakoff's "politeness principle" and theories of "femininity" and "masculinity" in the context of gender language differences. The objective is to depict the current status of gender language differences and address the issues prevalent in the representation of women's roles in films. It calls for film and television media to acknowledge the phenomenon of men and women breaking language stereotypes and provide new insights for more objective character shaping that better reflects women's reality. The article also affirms the inclusiveness and diversity portrayed in "The Transient Universe," providing a platform for the "reversal" phenomenon of gender language differences between men and women..

## **2 Lakoff's Principles of Politeness**

Lakoff's principles for examining the relationship between politeness and gender provide a framework that can coexist or be mutually exclusive depending on the context <sup>[1]</sup>. The first principle, "Formal," emphasizes maintaining a certain level of distance and is commonly observed in etiquette books and formal settings. Academic writings, for instance, employ professional terms and objective language to meet the requirements of formal occasions. The second principle, "Respect," recognizes the addressee's superiority and can be used independently or in conjunction with other rules. The third principle, "Friendship," applies to more private and intimate situations, where conversational partners are considered equal. It involves innocuous jokes between friends or mutual teasing between lovers, fostering a friendly atmosphere. However, it is important to note that the third principle may be deemed impolite if the level of familiarity or the formality of the situation does not align with the degree of friendship.

## **3 Principles of Politeness and " Everything Everywhere All at Once"**

In "Everything Everywhere All at Once," the male and female protagonists deviate from the typical character traits found in most movies. The female protagonist is depicted as an impatient and busy middle-aged woman with tense relationships, while the male

protagonist appears gentle but weak, kind and polite, yet unable to handle many things independently.

Analyzing the dialogue between the male and female leads in the film, their language characteristics can be examined from three perspectives. Firstly, in terms of speech behavior, Evelyn denies Waymond's comfort using foul language and issues direct and forceful orders. Waymond, on the other hand, employs euphemisms to communicate with Evelyn, offering compliments to ease her tension and provide encouragement. Secondly, concerning sentence patterns, Evelyn frequently uses high-intensity imperative sentences to assign tasks without granting Waymond any choice. In contrast, Waymond presents suggestions using interrogative sentences, demonstrating tactfulness and allowing the listener to make choices. He answers all of Evelyn's questions and uses additional interrogative sentences to comfort her when she is nervous. Lastly, regarding voice and intonation, Evelyn speaks with a high-pitched, fast-paced, and tough tone, emphasizing quick responses and displaying an unfriendly attitude and aversion to communication. Waymond, however, adopts a gentle and cautious tone, reflecting friendliness, attentiveness, and a willingness to engage in dialogue.

The dialogue between Waymond and Evelyn, portrayed as a husband and wife, exhibits an intimate tone <sup>[2]</sup>, aligning with the second and third rules of Lakoff's Politeness Principle. Waymond consistently provides Evelyn with choices when asking questions and making requests, adhering to the second rule. He uses additional interrogative sentences to comfort and encourage Evelyn, aiming to create a relaxed and positive atmosphere amidst tension, which corresponds to the third rule of Lakoff's politeness principles. This depiction deviates from the traditional stereotype where women employ more euphemisms, compliments, additional interrogative sentences, and a gentle tone to convey politeness <sup>[1]</sup>. The film's portrayal highlights a reversal of gender language differences between the heroine and the hero, challenging existing stereotypes..

## 4 Femininity and Masculinity

"Femininity" and "masculinity" represent gender temperaments shaped by the association of biological sex with social gender. These temperaments are based on primary and secondary sexual characteristics and encompass psychological traits and behaviors that highlight the contrast between men and women. Femininity is characterized by qualities such as softness, docility, timidity, domestic skills, and effective communication, which are closely tied to family, relationships, and social achievements. In a male-centered and male-dominated social system, femininity tends to be associated with expressive behavior and affinity, while masculinity tends to be associated with instrumental behavior and physical abilities that are more aligned with the needs of social production. Consequently, this inequality gives rise to stereotypes reinforcing the notions of male superiority and strength, and female weakness and inferiority <sup>[3]</sup>.

In the mid-20th century, theories on the essence of gender temperament and gender roles solidified the binary opposition between sexes, linking male behavior with masculinity and female behavior with femininity. Such divisions and regulations further entrenched gender temperaments, perpetuating male dominance and female

subjugation while prescribing specific language patterns for men and women. The male-dominated binary thinking mode consolidated and reinforced gender temperament characteristics, making gender language differences more apparent. However, with the development of society and the feminist movement, there has been a gradual shift toward challenging the male-centered binary opposition, leading to more diversified understandings of gender temperament [4].

"Everything Everywhere All at Once," as a film originating from the European and American cultural context, not only reflects the social reality of improving women's status, transforming their social roles, and diversifying gender temperaments, but also aligns with the values and aesthetics of Western political correctness. Although Evelyn and Waymond were influenced by traditional and conservative Eastern culture despite being born in China, their temperament and traditional stereotypes exhibit "upside-down" characteristics. Evelyn's family model deviates from the traditional notion of male dominance in external matters and female dominance in domestic affairs. Evelyn takes on most of the responsibilities of running the laundry and dealing with customer issues, while Waymond excels in building relationships and plays a supporting role. This contradicts the traditional expectation that women focus on family responsibilities. Furthermore, Evelyn possesses a strong personality, and her language characteristics do not conform to traditional expectations of women's language, sometimes lacking politeness. In contrast, Waymond has a soft and gentle personality, and his language use aligns more with the standards of politeness, but it deviates from traditional expectations of male language. For instance, when addressing Evelyn's father in the film, Evelyn prefers to call him "Ba" with a falling tone and rapid speech, whereas Waymond often uses a rising tone and elongates the name as "Ba--ba," displaying cuteness and playfulness reminiscent of a child, a name typically more associated with women [5].

## 5 The reason for the "inversion."

The gender language difference between men and women can be attributed to two main factors. First, there are physiological differences between men and women that affect their voices and timbre due to variations in their vocal cord structure. Generally, men have long and thick vocal cords, resulting in deeper voices, while women have short and thin vocal cords, leading to higher and sharper voices. Consequently, society has aesthetic expectations regarding the pronunciation and intonation of men and women, favoring soft and gentle speech for women and higher-pitched and rougher speech for men [6].

The second factor influencing gender language differences is social in nature. Since the emergence of patriarchal societies, women have been assigned subordinate positions with lower social status compared to men. Social roles and division of labor have traditionally dictated that men dominate the public sphere while women are responsible for household affairs. Women's way of speaking, including vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns, has been shaped and restricted by societal norms established by men. Women are often educated to embody the ideals of being a "lady" by displaying gentleness, beauty, and a friendly temperament to cater to men, thereby attaining higher

social status. However, they are also expected to adhere to normative and polite language standards to teach children and communicate with others <sup>[7]</sup>. This social division of labor has perpetuated lower economic status for women, leading to an overall political and social disparity between men and women. As a result, gender language differences have emerged, with men being associated with strength, directness, and competitiveness, while women are expected to be tactful, polite, and cooperative <sup>[8]</sup>.

As society progresses and the economy develops, the social and economic structures have undergone deconstruction since the Industrial Revolution. Women have become more involved in the social division of labor, resulting in gradual improvements in their economic status and increased awareness of the disadvantages they face in society. Equality has become a pursuit to enhance social status and demand equal status and power with men. The feminist and women's liberation movements, especially since the 1960s, have fueled research on gender language differences, discrimination, and their underlying causes. Scholars such as Lakoff, D. Bolinger, and M. Schulz have contributed to a broader understanding of male and female language, aiming to explore women's greater right to speak in the future and foster more friendly communication between the sexes. These factors have driven changes in women's language, gradually breaking traditional language stereotypes. In modern society, women's language has become more assertive and direct, focusing on expressing personal opinions clearly. Women's involvement in public speaking, economic and commercial activities, political and cultural engagements, and the need to communicate and express their views has contributed to this shift. Women employ a range of speech patterns, including soft-spoken and euphemistic tones, as well as high-pitched, direct, and decisive approaches. Vocabulary and sentence patterns may include interrogative sentences, request sentences, declarative vocabulary, rhetorical questions, and even imperative sentences to express their views and assert their needs <sup>[1]</sup>.

Regarding communication topics, women have transitioned from passive receivers to active senders, as depicted in traditional stereotypes. They now engage in more formal topics, emphasizing the social status and workability of the other party rather than solely focusing on appearances. While traditional language stereotypes demand politeness and decency from women, modern women are increasingly comfortable expressing themselves using swearing and foul language, which may be considered rude and uncivilized. Although society still maintains certain expectations for men to use traditional masculine language, developing a more tolerant attitude toward diverse languages has granted both men and women greater linguistic freedom. The standard associated with masculine language has become less rigid. Additionally, due to the improvement in women's status, the notion of men being stronger than women has been challenged and dispelled, leading to a trend of women seeking men with more feminine characteristics. This shift has influenced social aesthetics, altered the criteria for evaluating a man's popularity, and downplayed the necessity and importance of conforming to traditional concepts of masculinity. Consequently, modern masculinity is characterized by greater diversity <sup>[9]</sup>.

## 6 The Inclusiveness of "Everything Everywhere All at Once"

As the latest Oscar best picture in 2023, "Everything Everywhere All at Once" reflects the culture of Western European and American countries. Despite having Chinese main characters, the film's perspective is Western, aligning with Western understanding and impressions of Chinese and Eastern culture. Unlike Eastern countries with conservative and traditional concepts, Western countries tend to embrace diversified development in shaping gender temperament and breaking traditional gender differences. The concept of "political correctness" has emerged, supporting the diversified development of gender temperament and challenging traditional stereotypes <sup>[10]</sup>. The film's inclusiveness stems from the protagonists' deviation from traditional gender stereotypes.

In "Everything Everywhere All at Once," both the female protagonist, Evelyn, and the male protagonist, Waymond, deviate from traditional gender stereotypes in terms of character traits and language styles. They present an "upside-down" state, defying conventional notions of femininity and masculinity. Breaking traditional concepts of gender temperament, especially for women, often results in societal degradation <sup>[11]</sup>. However, in the film, Evelyn's unconventional behavior and Waymond's non-conformity to traditional masculinity are not met with criticism or objection from their daughter, customers, or tax office staff. Evelyn engages in various responsibilities, gives direct orders, and maintains an unfriendly and commanding tone, while Waymond passively obeys Evelyn's orders, refrains from actively taking on family responsibilities, and communicates with Evelyn in a friendly and soft tone, despite being rejected. The daughter and customers find this behavior normal and become accustomed to it. Over time, Evelyn accepts and learns from Waymond's philosophy of life, embraces his more traditionally feminine characteristics, and rescues her daughter from despair. Waymond, though not ideal for the chaotic life with Evelyn, seeks to repair their relationship through divorce, helping resolve conflicts and adding joy to their tumultuous life.

The tolerance of gender temperament and the phenomenon of "inversion" of gender language, driven by politeness, reflects a societal demand and support to break free from traditional concepts and embrace diversified and individualized development. It challenges traditional notions of male and female roles in movies, catering to audiences who pursue equality between men and women and embrace diverse gender temperaments. This inclusiveness allows audiences still influenced by traditional concepts to witness diversity. While issues surround modernized gender temperament concepts, this more progressive and ideal way of interpersonal relationships between men and women influences aesthetics and choices. The inclusiveness between the heroine and her husband and other characters in "Everything Everywhere All at Once" represents social progress and a departure from the male-dominated binary gender opposition model. It offers new possibilities to enhance relationships between the sexes, shape roles aligned with the gender ethos of the modern spirit, and promote friendly and equal communication between men and women..

## 7 Conclusion

Through analyzing the language of the protagonists in "Everything Everywhere All at Once," their gender language differences and the "reversed" gender temperament from traditional stereotypes were identified. The film exhibits tolerance towards their deviation from traditional concepts, reflecting social progress. As society continues to develop and feminist theory evolves, there will be increasing demands for diversified gender temperament and the gradual elimination of gender-specific requirements. As reflections of social reality, films and television should provide a platform that supports diverse development and promotes equal exchanges between men and women. However, this article has certain limitations. Firstly, Lakoff's politeness principle is relatively old and more applicable to English, excluding some contextual situations. Additionally, the exploration of other aspects is relatively superficial and lacks comprehensiveness. Future research should delve deeper into changes in gender temperament and language characteristics of men and women in movies.

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