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SOCIOLINGUISTICS: LANGUAGE USE, VARIATION AND IDENTITY IN PARADIGMS OF GENDER

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines language variation in the specific context of gender identity and social stature. Predicated on indicative studies conducted by experts within the sociolinguistic playfield, the aim of this analysis is to deconstruct the four approaches to Language and Gender Theory and therefore trace the trajectory of such research across the years.

KEYWORDS: *Sociolinguistics, Paradigms of Gender, Language Use*

INTRODUCTION

An Expanding Constellation of Language and Gender Research

The dynamic between one's linguistic behavior and their/her/his **gender** is an intricate concept**,** continually under scrutiny. Having raised myriad responses across a multitude of paradigms, the equation between language and gender Remains fluid. Notable linguists such as Robin Lakoff, Candace West, Don H. Zimmerman, Deborah Tannen, Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron (to name a few) have adopted varying frames of reference to structure the many analyses. Broadly, the entire field of research till date can be broken down into four approaches. Namely, the deficit approach, the dominance approach, the difference approach and the relatively recent discourse approach. Though divergent and at certain points directly oppositional, these approaches are not well defined, securely partitioned brackets. Rather, these theories bleed into one another and are constellations of interrelated models that actively respond to each other. Whether existing in support or in controversy, these patterns bring into question, whether or not it is adequate to decode language and gender with a male-female binary lens. Is one's language use imbued with innate proclivities that indicate gendered differences or for that matter, positioning? And if so, what might these deviations be attributed to? The aim of this essay is to examine these issues from multiple perspectives, and subsequently unpack a series of critical studies tracing the trajectory of such research.

Preliminary studies in this regard often lacked empirical evidence and were biased by prevailing stereotypes of womanly conduct. Founded in folk linguistic beliefs, that is through intuitive observation of common perception, these theories moved to suggest that a woman's use of language is inferior in comparison to that of a man's. Operating in a structure where 'male language' was allegedly the norm (Coates, 2004, p.5), the deficit approach is characterized by its predisposition to intrinsic inequity. Otto Jespersen, a Danish Professor of English Language, published a set of theories demarcating how women's use of language was dictated by their secondary, trivial status (Jespersen, 1922). His postulations implied that women, owing to their conservatism, tend not to stray from standard forms, possess narrow vocabulary, and have a greater propensity to banally paraphrase or euphemize coarse expressions. Men, avoiding what is 'commonplace' become 'the chief renovators of language' insofar that they spearhead linguistic innovation (ibid. p.247).

Blatantly depreciating women's competence, Jespersen made claim that 'a woman's thought is no sooner formed than uttered' (ibid. p.253) and attributed such rapidity of thought to a lack of registration. He asserted that because women are emotional rather than intellectual beings, they slant towards half-finished sentences, intensive use of hyperbole, and ineffectually deploy adverbs. These conjectures in effect, suggest that there is a clear discrepancy between a 'woman's language' and what is supposedly considered as 'neutral language'. Robin Lakoff's Language and Woman's Place, 1975 plays a pivotal role in channeling such analyses away from such blatantly derogatory model and towards a more comprehensive one. Though also lacking sufficient empirical evidence and systematic methodology, her arguments usher in crucial questions in relation to a woman's linguistic tendencies, and thus are widely cited and/or are vitiated across other approaches. Lakoff suggests that typical women's speech subsumes the following characteristics.

- Rising intonation on declarative statements.
- 'Superpolite' or euphemized forms and an aversion to swear words
- Tag questions, for example, 'Lovely weather isn't it?'
- Use of hypercorrect grammar
- Using hedges and fillers, such as 'you know, well, sort of '
- Empty adjectives such as 'divine, lovely, adorable'
- Over utilization of intensifiers such as 'just' or 'so'
- An extensive vocabulary of colors and words specific to their interests (and by implication, domesticated activities)

(Lakoff, 1975)

One might even say that Lakoff's postulations 'euphemize' Jespersen's earlier, more radically reductive claims, lending them justified explanations. As is also noted by Coates, while Lakoff adopts a relatively feminist explanatory model, the content itself presents many parallels to Jespersen's observations (Coates, 2004). Her theories move to legitimize the archetypal characteristics of women's speech that in turn render their inferiority. A tag question is a syntactic device that delineates a lack of assertiveness or rather something that comes across as 'an apology for making an assertion at all' (Lakoff, 1975, p.54). Hedges such as y' know or kind are tools for protection or 'deference' inasmuch that they convey uncertainty regarding the subject of the statements. Directly contrasting women's language from one that is stimulated by intellectual cognitive processes, Lakoff claims that 'academic women are amongst the least appropriate to be speakers of this language' (ibid, p.57). Hypercorrect grammar, blunted and overly polite forms, euphemisms and ultra 'proper' phraseology – all demarcate rigid social disciplines women were conventionally expected to adhere to. Her argument hinges on the premise that women speak as they do due to how they have been cultured from childhood. Incessantly caught in arbiter logic, she suggests that it is the linguistic conduct a woman learns as 'correct' which in turn subjects her to the aforementioned depreciating value judgments. A 'woman's language' exacerbates the submersion of a woman's personal identity–attributed to weakened means of expression that instead convey triviality in subject matter. The ultimate effect, she claims, is 'systematically denied access to power' (ibid, p.7)

Thus to analyze the exercise of power and subordination through language becomes the corollary of tracing women's inferior status. The dominance approach predicates that discourse will portray as well as propagate male authority

and female subservience. Dale Spender, a notable feminist scholar, indicates that male power is embedded within the norms of reality and by effect, in linguistic codes. She advocates the notion that the male lexical configuration is what is generic, unmarked (normative). Classified by their relativity, female terms are unmarked and peripheral (Spender, 1980). For example, not only is the term ‘bachelor’ more neutral than its supposed equivalent ‘bachelorette’, connotations attached to both these lexical items invite unaligned contextual judgments. Both terms refer to an unmarried individual. But the former gives the impression of a free, spontaneous lifestyle while the latter often underscores loneliness and subjects defined by their *lack* of marital status (Mooney, Evans, 2015). As is also seen in the case of titles, the language accentuates the societal emphasis of identifying women’s *relations* to men. ‘Mr’ is used for all men regardless of their status, but the use of ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’ is with specificity to marriage (ibid.). Language and societal expectation remain closely interlaced with respect to marking designated domains. Another study by Heiko Motschenbacher analyses the conventional male-female binomial ordering in terms of nouns (For example, man/woman), pronouns (he/she), heterosexual roles (husband/wife), address terms (sir/madam) and occupational contexts (host / hostess) (Motschenbacher, 2013). The major deviances in her study manifested within kinship terms wherein the generally prevailing order was flipped such as mother/father, aunt/uncle, and niece/nephew and so on. These lexical placements, coupled with the aforementioned inequities seem to collectively allude to the idea that women are confined to domestic spheres while men control arenas of the more intellectually esteemed public discourse. A study of electronic discourse conducted by Herring, Johnson and DiBenedetto (1998) revealed significant irregularities not only between the contributions made by men and women, but also between perceptions of gender expectation. A 5-week discussion about ‘men’s literature’ was marked by 70 % of the contributions being made by men, and in the midst, a period of two days where the women’s participation was relatively greater. During this brief reversal in dynamics, it was recorded that men often felt stifled, ‘silenced’ and ‘dominated’. These observations present a direct reflection of skewed normativity. ‘[B]y contributing more even temporarily… women in the group violated the unspoken convention that control of public discourse belongs rightfully to men’ (Herring et al 1998 cited in Coates, 2004 p.117). Such research not only probes the question of platforms of conversation but also that of who talks more. Borne out of such analysis, Spender deconstructs the persistence of the myth regarding women’s verbosity. While there is no statistical evidence that women talk more than men, Spender claims that their comparative talkativeness is not in relation to men, but relative to silence (Spender, 1980). This notion finds its roots within ancient cultural stereotype. As was previously also advocated for by Jespersen, the perception of the ideal ‘silent woman’ is further analyzed as power-play. To silence a woman is a scheme to impose supremacy and extract obedience (Coates, 2004).

Linguists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, to supplement the study of women’s restricted rights to speak, have demonstrated how interruptions in a conversation exhibit and reground power relations. They considered two key parameters overlaps–minor instances of over-anticipation by the following speaker, and interruptions–violating the conversational floor by disrupting turn-taking rules. (West and Zimmerman, 1975 cited in Coates 2004). They taped a series of thirty-one conversations held at various public places on the campus of the University of California – 10 between two men, 10 between two women, and the remaining between a woman and a man. They observed a stark contrast in the frequency of both overlaps and interruptions within same sex and cross sex interactions.

Table 2 shows a proportionate distribution of both interruptions and overlaps indicate a collaborative understanding between same-sex conversations, but cross sex conversations present drastic variances. All instances of overlapping, and 46 out of the 48 interruptions were that of a man interrupting a woman. While there was equilibrium in

such occurrences even amongst two women, they did not show tendencies to interrupt men. This substantiates the idea that such dominance alludes to normatively, that their early socialization corroborates that women are expected to be interrupted (Holmes. 2017). However the theory that women are mere passive subjects in a conversation has often been revoked. Pamela Fishman (1983) while also endorsing that cross-sex conversations uphold dimensions of power, suggests that the imbalance lies in the distribution of work – that women are the 'shitworkers' of routine interactions who subsequently maintain 'normative' male-female relations (Fishman, 1983, p.405). Drawing on data collected from 52-hours of taped conversations between partners in their homes, her research furnishes a framework that lends previously identified traits within such conversations functionality. Reexamining Lakoff's postulations, Fishman asserts that the habit of asking questions, or using hedging functions such as 'you know' are not reflective of insecurity, but are concise utterances that further evoke and guarantee responses (Fishman, 1983 p.403). Her transcripts exhibit how women utilize linguistic apparatus such as minimal responses (such as 'mm', 'yeah' or 'oh') to maintain the structure of the conversation and thereby act in support. She suggests that opening discussions with statements like 'D'you know what?' and remarks like 'This is interesting', are invites to collaborate and call for attention (ibid. p.401). In contraposition, men used delayed minimal responses, showed a lack of cooperation, and tendencies to exclusively engage with topics probed by them (ibid.). This strikes an interesting controversy between the operations of silence in language. While earlier theories observe this as a recurrent feature linked to oppressing women, Fishman's research suggests that such withdrawn interactional conduct by men became an exercise of power by refusing to collaborate.

Table 1: Constitution of the Combined Twenty Same-Sex Conversations

Parameter	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Total
Overlaps	12	10	22
Interruptions	3	4	7

Source: (based on West and Zimmerman, 1975,p.115 cited in Coates 2004, p.114)

Table 2: Constitution of Eleven Cross-Sex Conversations

Parameter	Male	Female	Total
Overlaps	9	0	9
Interruptions	46	2	48

Source: (based on West and Zimmerman, 1975,p.116 cited in Coates 2004, p.114)

It is these antithetical variations in conversational styles that surged a new wave of research across yet another paradigm, namely the difference approach. It is predicated on the notion that merely analyzing gendered discourse with the purview of 'male-dominance' is an inadequate framework (Tannen, 1991). Deborah Tannen, a major contributor to studies in this arena, justifies that though tracing the manifestation of contrasting styles will not close the chasm in between them, it is a comprehensive practice that banishes the 'mutual mystification and blame' (Tannen, 1991, p.21). This theory suggests that divergent communicative traits stem from separate, coherent 'sub-cultures' (ibid.). Much of her analysis rests on the bifurcating the spheres of conversation. Advocating previously broached postulations regarding public and private dimensions of talk, she accredits this partition to an incongruence of function. While men engage in 'report talk' – 'a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order' (ibid. p.36), women tend towards 'rapport talk'. Such personal talks centralize around indulging in practices of self disclosure and limn a pattern of establishing relationships. Jennifer Coates' Women Talk (1996) reconnoiters women's collaborative paradigm of communication that effectively creates a platform to cultivate solidarity. Quite in contrast to the 'single floor' model that men often engage with, which is a) defined by its asymmetrical dynamic (wherein speakers do not interact as equals), b)

places emphasis on singular turn-taking and finally, c) is focused on the individual speaker's position vis-à-vis the community's – the collaborative floor is a harmoniously shared open space (Coates, 1996). Throughout her expositions of the interactional structure, she creates a metaphorical parallelism between women's talk and 'jam sessions' (ibid. p.117). Much like musical constructions imbued with developed pace, solos, and ensembles, the conversations highlight joint effort and simultaneity (ibid.). Consider for example, the following extract from a conversation about 'backaches' (Note: slashes indicate the end of conversational chunk, dashes before staves are to be read simultaneously)

BECKY: my back- my back is connected with my periods […] (1)

BECKY: yeah/

JESS: so's mine I get really bad back a- back down there you know/ (2)

CLAIRE: so do I/ back aches/ I can't go like that/ I can't go like (3)

BECKY: yeah/

CLAIRE: that/ and I just ((xx)) a back rest/

JESS: but. ho- hot watter bottles help (4)

HANNAH: hot water bottles help me as well/

BECKY: hot watter bottles help/

CLAIRE: help so much/

JESS: help/ (5)

(Coates, 1996, p.81)

All participants corroborate each others' statements through the practice of 'mirroring' utterances. Such linguistic reflections can be seen in the form of all-inclusive cyclic turns around shared subtopics, synchronization and repetition of clauses by listeners (as seen in stave-5), and the production of matching stories/contributions. These utterances also 'meld together' in terms of intonation patterns and 'rhythmic quality' (ibid. 119). Not only did her analysis of recorded conversations among women friends present 'jointly constructed' statements by a combination of speakers, but also peculiar syntactic structures with verbally incomplete statements. While earlier postulations accorded such linguistic behavior to a lack of competence and uncertainty (Jespersen, a case in point), Coates' rebuts this view by placing emphasis on the speakers' close attention to grammatical structures, involvement with subject matter and sufficient mutual understanding to anticipate. The connotation that lies herein is that all utterances do not exclusively belong to the speaker but to all participants sharing the floor. This foundational element appears as a foil to men's competitive interactional model, where independence and personal competence take precedence over concurrence (Tannen, 1991). Women's talk thus, emerges as a collective demonstration of mutual understanding. Tannen's postulations regarding cooperative overlapping practices substantiate this notion of joint functionality. She suggests that these overlaps and 'latchings' (interruptions without pauses) heighten involvement and interest and thus, speakers comfortably 'yield to an intrusion' and moreover, freely intrude (Tannen, 1991, p.97). Coates argues that much like the essence of a relationship in itself, conversations gradually advance with the 'ethic of reciprocity', balanced and harmonized throughout their conduction

(Coates, 1996. p.93). She claims that such unity in collaborative function can avouch for reviewing many of the other previously identified linguistic traits specific to women's talk. Directly offsetting stereotypical tendencies to interpret hedges as markers of 'unassertive', 'tentative' or bluntly 'weak' dispositions (As was projected by Lakoff's speculations), she suggests, '[W]omen's ability to exploit the multifunctional potential of hedges is a strength, not a weakness, and arises from women's sensitivity to interpersonal aspects of talk' (ibid. p.172). By using hedges like 'sort of', 'um' or really' speakers wield the vital situational element of vagueness to soften controversial or sensitive claims and hence, take into account the addressee's attitudes towards the subject. Not only is this device instrumental in protecting the 'face' (In light of the metaphorical reference) of all participants involved, it also reduces the social distance between them. In contraposition to men's talk, women bridge gaps by the avoidance of 'playing the expert' (ibid. p.160). Yet another misunderstood device engineered to tackle such cavities is to ask questions. Much like hedges, Coates suggests that questions can minimize the probability of conflict inasmuch that they help offer differing perspectives without being dismissive of other stances. She also believes that they manifest as pivotal catalysts that steer and instigate topic development. Additionally, they are essential for the maintenance of the 'conversational jam' and exist as queues to invite contributions, encourage elaboration and subsequently allow participants 'to check that they are still in tune with each other' (ibid. p. 179). Speakers collectively signal their acceptance of contributions with the use of minimal responses – not quite arbitrary, but carefully timed at the end of chunks so as not to disrupt the 'rhythm' of the dialogue as a whole (ibid.). Much like a harmonious partnership, speakers are agents as well as principles of the conversation in the sense that these utterances could indicate individual correspondence, as well as that on behalf of all other participants. Tannen presented the view that the materialization of these linguistic proclivities amongst both women and men may well be traced back to the nascent stages – socializations during childhood. Drawing on anthropological analyses of Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker, Tannen attributes much of the friction between conversational styles to childhood language constructions of same-sex groups. While young boys learn to indulge in games with hierarchical structures, with 'winners' and 'losers', games that necessitate seizing control – young girls are more concerned about group dynamics and often resolve in compromise (Tannen, 1991, p.20).

Throughout the inspection of both men and women's linguistic behaviors, the pattern of research thus far, evolved from first considering underlying grounds for the enactment of male-female inequalities to then exclusively differentiating derivatives of two separate social fundaments. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be observed that overarching structures at this stage, albeit emphasizing gender rather than sex, still presented striking commonalities in terms of formulaic foundations and binary rigidity. Retrospectively, we can observe an overlap on the assumption of two coherent, 'internally homogenous' structures – masculine or feminine, that are rooted in early socializations (Cameron, 2005, p.486). The discourse approach transcends these assumptions and emerges as an interfaced active continuum inasmuch that it does not discount earlier differences or gaps, but unhinges the succeeding analyses from the universalized, oversimplified frameworks. These studies liberate gendered linguistic behavior from vantage points of acquisition and consequence and instead focalize on production and 'performativity' (Cameron, 1997, p.49). This idea, propelled by Judith Butler's conception of gender identities, suggests that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not attributes that we have, but are interpretations of what we do. She claims that gender is not a fixed characteristic but 'a repeated stylization of the body' (Butler, 1990, p.33 cited in Cameron 1997, p.49)

This view convolutes the aforementioned premises of cardinal functionalities as well as opposing conversational styles. Cameron's observation of men's conversations comes forth as a case in point. It reproduces invariably blurred lines,

both parallel and crossing, between preceding analyses of report/rapport functions and cooperative/competitive models. Her reproduction of a dialogue between male friends about 'that really gay guy' contradicts previously pigeonholed, autonomous structures, thereby highlighting their elusiveness. Consider the following extract-

[…]

ED: =he's probably he'[s like

CARL: [he really likes (6)

BRYAN: =he

ED: =he's like at home combing his leg hairs=

CARL: his legs= (7)

BRYAN: he doesn't have any leg her though= [yes and oh

ED: =he real[ly likes (8)

ED: his legs=

AL: =very long very white and very skinny (9)

BRYAN: those ridiculous Reeboks that are always (indeciph)

And goofy white socks always striped= [tube socks

ED: = that's right (10)

ED: he's the antithesis of man (11)

(Cited from Cameron, 1997, p.54)

This conversation, as underscored by Cameron, interpolates typified characteristics of 'women's talk' on varied levels. Most prominently in terms of function and subject matter, it deviates from traditional concerns of masculinity and instead of a mere exchange of information it is essentially a close-knit, evaluative discussion of an 'out-group' entity (in other words, 'gossip) (ibid). Evaluations are marked in terms of bodily appearances and specificity in descriptions of attire ('Reeboks', 'tube socks')–also supposedly feminine interests. Due to the interaction's affirmation of solidarity, and better yet, of disclosure, it closely corresponds to rapport building frames. In terms of linguistic constructions and format, this extract clearly mounts a cooperative style of communication. Much like the previously cited example produced by Coates (1996), this study illustrates analogous usage patterns with many collaborative devices. Prevalent in this extract, are jointly constructed utterances, latchings, hedging functions (such as 'like'), and supportive corroboration ('that's right) (ibid.). However, as Cameron eminently delineates, that it would be a prematurely reductive to give this exchange a 'feminine' emblem. The aspect that theoretically substantiates the incoherence of earlier approaches, and the crucially redirected dynamic focal lens thereof, is the combination with competitive elements. In this particular example, uncooperative interruptions feature as a key component amongst participants, and ultimately result in silencing the interrupted. Contributions made by Al and Carl are significantly shorter, and often not reciprocated. Bryan and Ed dawn the role of relatively dominant participants in the discussion and thus, mark their presence on the larger proportions of the

conversational floor. Cameron detects traces of competition, even amongst these two dominant speakers even though the group is primarily engaged in a collaborative enterprise (Ibid. p.58). Soliciting the corollary as a broader application to the approach, she directly responds to Tannen's strict bifurcations, 'If men rarely engage in certain kinds of talk, an explanation is called for. But if they do engage in it even very occasionally, an explanation in terms of pure ignorance will not do' (ibid, p. 60). She propounds instead, that the performance of 'masculinity' or 'femininity' is a consequential, and ongoing reproduction within cultures where a large amount of gendered discourse circulates and subsequently 'appropriates' (ibid). The injunction to resist non-binary analyses broadens the horizon for research parameters and what ultimately surfaces is the idea that there can be multiple linguistic 'gender repertoires'. Cameron also highlights a contemporary shift from focusing on mainstream heteronormativity to a more 'liminal' focus, that of studying non-traditional sexualities. An example that substantiates this outlook is Rusty Barrett's (1995) investigation of language used by African-American drag queens. Their linguistic performances undercut Lakoff's polite, feminized version of 'Women's language' with the use of a 'street' variant, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and in doing so, construct a sexually ambiguous persona (Barrett, 1995 cited in Cameron, 2005 p.49).

A panoramic swerve in terms of the central question is that instead of probing the binary issues of what men do versus what women do – examinations are conscious of the myriad diversities of identity. The question that is thus, more pertinent is 'which men and which women do you mean' (Cameron, 2005, p.487). One deconstruction of this inquiry is the concept of 'Communities of Practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999) that accentuates the correlation between language and locally grouped endeavors. This notion follows the premise that the context of local practices –their jointly learnt acquisitions and repeated application to cultures–is a constant and inseparable variable in how men and women develop ways of using language. Penelope Eckert's analysis of students at Belten High, a school in Detroit demonstrates multiple intersectional dichotomies between language, gender and social category. She studied the phonological variation of boys and girls in two dominant divisions – 'jocks' (students who are actively involved within the school arena, plan to pursue a college education and thus are the embodiment of middle class- culture) and 'burnouts' (students who have ostracized themselves from central norms of the school and instead look outward for signification, thus embodying a working-class approach) (Coates, 2004, p.59). The two variables under examination were (uh), considering the backing of this vowel (inasmuch that the word but sounds much like bought) and (ay), in the manner where the nuclei [a] of the diphthong in the word file would be raised to the extent that it subsequently sounds like foil (ibid.).

Her Recordings Surfaced in the Following Pattern

Figure 1 & 2 shows these results underscore non-uniform gendered linguistic behavior and in turn vaunt its reliance on social factors in order to construct identities. As observed, the prominent points of inflection occur in the case of burnout girls' use of vernacular variants, while the jock girls use more standard forms. The jock and burnout girls' usage in hence more polarized, constituting the 'linguistic extremes' within their communities (ibid, p.195). An explanatory diagnosis of this deviance is that middle class women (that is, the jock girls) and working class men (burnout boys) display no conflicting proclivities, and their linguistic behavior is predictably parallel in terms of gender and class. The postulation doesn't however align with the remaining two categories. For this reason, linguistic choices of the burnout girls arise out of friction between their gender and burnout status, in which they resolve to conduct the latter (Coates, 2004, p.65). The conclusion hence alludes to the idea of linguistic performativity, and its ultimate function being, its fluidity. The above approach – updated theoretically in and of itself and within modernized real-world contexts, is proof that linguistic behavior and gender have a definite yet highly alterable relationship. As

inquiries into the equation between language and gender continue to crystallize, the lens continues to adjust, not only to incoming theoretical approaches but also to instrumentally changing outlooks in the contemporary world. Postulations, both in sync and those contradictory fuel such discourse with vantage points that will inevitably be challenged by approaches yet to come. As preceding sections aim to demonstrate, social context is a crucial determinant as far as the analysis of gender goes. Undoubtedly, the evolving paradigms of sexualities and the changing role of women in societies today will lend further clarifications to aforementioned conceptions and launch this study into yet uncharted directions.

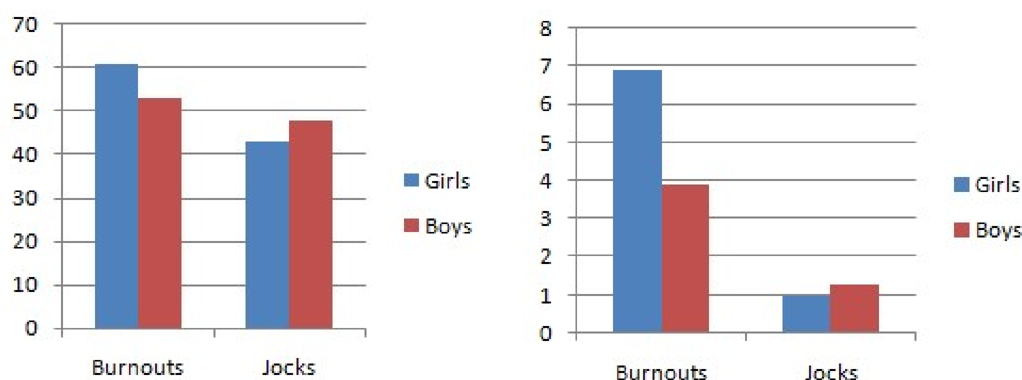

Figure 1 Percentage of Backed Tokens (Uh).
Figure 2 Percentage of Extreme Raised Tokens (Ay).
(Eckert, McConnell-Ginet, 1999)

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