

A Study of the Characteristics of Female Language Expression in *Never have I ever*

Qiaoqiao Wu

Nanning normal university, Guangxi, China.

Abstract

Based on the perspective of sociolinguistics, this paper studies and analyzes the 2022 American school drama *Never have I ever* (Tristram Shapeero) within the framework of Julia Wood's theory of female linguistic features. By analyzing the characters' language in the discourse, it explores and interprets the language characteristics of female high school students in the present United States and analyzes them in comparison with male language. It was found that the language of female high school students conformed to Julia Wood's theory of female language with four characteristics: equality, good questioning, positive response, and tentativeness, which were occasionally reflected by males, but the frequency was still low. Most of the male language is still dominated by declarative sentences and direct expression of their thoughts, which is significantly different from the female language. This study is intended to reveal the communicative styles of contemporary young males and females, to help avoid conflicts arising from misunderstanding of language and to improve mutual understanding between men and women.

Keywords

Sociolinguistics; feminine language.

1. Introduction

Language is a way of communication between people, which is the core element of sociolinguistics, and people cannot interact with each other without language. As language is created by human beings, gender differences inevitably exist, and female language, as an important part of human language, has attracted much attention in the field of linguistics. In the course of previous studies, scholars have found that because women are in a different position from men in society and daily life, female language has its own unique expressions that are different from those of male language. Therefore, it has become, to a certain extent, the norms of language and the weathervane of future trends.

Never have I ever It is an American coming-of-age story comedy, created by Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher, with a plot based in part on creator Kaling's true childhood story. Described as a watershed in Hollywood's portrayal of South Asian characters, the show has been praised for breaking stereotypes of Asians. The story centers around Devi Vishwakumar, a 15-year-old Tamil Indian-American female high school student from Sherman Oaks, Los Angeles. After a bad year in her freshman year Devi has her heart set on making it to the top of the school. But friends, family and inner feelings put that goal out of reach. The television series currently has three seasons with ten episodes per season, where each episode is 20 to 25 minutes long. The first season of *Never have I ever* It was chosen for this thesis as the corpus for this study. The reason why this show was chosen as the object of this study is because it is an American coming-of-age school drama, which shows the communication and exchanges between young people in the United States nowadays. By observing the communication of the main group of protagonists in this show, we can understand the linguistic expression characteristics of today's American

age women, and we can also directly collect the linguistic material of male-female communication, compare and analyze it, and observe the similarities and differences. I think that the friendship line and the conversation between women in the show is one of the compelling features of this TV series and is well suited to be used as a corpus for sociolinguistic research.

2. Literature Review

The study of male-female language differences can be traced back to the middle of the 17th century. Ethnographers were among the first to notice the existence of linguistic differences between males and females, and they believed that the differences were mostly differences in the use of vocabulary. As the 20th century approached, numerous scholars began to modernize the linguistic study of gender differences. During this period, many distinguished linguists took part in this research, such as O. Jespersen (1922), W. Labov (1922), P. Trudgill (1974) and R. Lakoff (1975). Then, in the course of investigating Yana's male and female forms of speech in 1929,, the American linguist Edward Sapir made it clear that there were clear differences between the languages of the sexes. Despite certain definitions, Edward Sapir's research was not theoretical or systematic, and he only briefly described a certain newly discovered linguistic phenomenon at the time, although it still benefited other scholars to further explore the issue. With the development of the feminist movement and sociolinguistics, more and more scholars have begun to study the relationship between language and gender since the 1960s. Compared with the previous stage, studies on the characteristics of women's language in this period are more detailed and systematic, as well as theory-based. In China, research on gendered language began in the late 1970s, focusing mainly on the formal differences between male and female language. During this period, representative linguists explored gendered language differences by introducing international achievements or based on their own experiences abroad (cf. Dai Weidong, 1983; Xu Xiangwu, 1986, etc.) [1]. Since then, numerous Chinese linguists have begun to study various aspects of sociolinguistics, and many books on sociolinguistics have also been published, such as Yang Yonglin's *By introducing and critically studying foreign research studies*, Chinese scholars have been engaging in this particular field. At the same time, they have made inspiring proposals that have contributed greatly to the further study of the topic of sociolinguistics.

This dissertation focuses on analyzing and researching within the framework of Julia Wood's theory of female linguistic features. Julia Wood has devoted herself to the study of communication, gender, and culture, and has identified several features of female language. She based her theory on R. Lakoff's ideas, but Wood did more research on top of that and incorporated her findings into her final theoretical framework [2]. Julia Wood claimed (Wood, 1994) that communication is the main way that women build and maintain relationships. They engage in conversations, share their feelings, and get to know each other. Women's speech tends to show connection, support and understanding. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the main characteristics of women's language are expressive equality, good questioning, positive response and tentativeness. Equality is a fundamental characteristic of female language. This means that women strive for equality and balance by matching communication experiences; women's language tends to include a lot of questions, which helps to better understand and expand on the topic, encouraging the other person to speak and trying to expand on the topic and ideas; another characteristic of women's language is that it will respond positively. Women like to encourage the other person to provide details to continue the topic; female language is also tentative. Women may equivocate to soften the tone and make the other person more comfortable.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

This study is mainly an investigation of the following questions: 1. Do the language characteristics of the female characters in the play (i.e. American female high school students) conform to Julua wood's theory of female language characteristics? 2. Is there any difference between the linguistic features of the female characters and the male characters in the play? What are the differences?

3.2. Research Method

This study starts with data collection, looking for and collecting relevant examples and data according to the relevant theories, then showing the relevant data through words and tables, and finally comparing and analyzing them to come up with the final conclusions and answers.

4. Data Research and Comparison

In this chapter, the author will analyze the dialogues in the play in the framework of Julua wood's theory of female linguistic features mentioned above, that is to say, compare and analyze them one by one in terms of the four major aspects, namely, equality, questioning, responding positively, and tentativeness, in response to the two major questions mentioned above.

4.1. Do the linguistic features of the female characters (i.e. American high school girls) in the play conform to Julua wood's theory of female linguistic features?

4.1.1. Equality

First of all, Julua wood believes that equality is the first extremely important linguistic feature of female language. When a woman hears what the other person is saying, she tries to achieve equality between them by expressing that they have the same ideas or experiences. For example, a woman might say, "You know, I've done the same thing many times." By doing this, equality is established between the two parties in the conversation and keeps the speaker from feeling alone in this feeling. (WOOD, 1991) In addition, female characteristics show that they understand the other person's feelings and situation. The following is an example taken from *Never have I ever*.

Devi: Are you not having one?

Paxton: No. I don't drink during swim season. You gotta keep the body right, you know?

Devi: Yeah, totally. If I had your body, I'd treat it right too. I'm so sorry. That was such a weird thing to say.

Devi, a woman, is one of the show's female protagonists; Paxton, a man, is one of the male protagonists, and they have the above conversation at a party. In this conversation, Devi uses language to show Paxton that she agrees with him. Although Devi's reaction in the conversation seems a little strange to Paxton, it is easy to see that Devi wants to try to prove that she and Paxton feel the same way so that Paxton does not think that he is the only one who feels this way. Devi tries to use her language to communicate with Paxton to reach some sort of equality, to find some sort of connection or common ground between the two, and thus to bring them closer together. After collecting data on the language of the play, the writer came up with the following statistics.

Table 1

Characters use language to show equality with each other	
Gender	Time
Female	45
Male	6

From the above table, we can see that the women in the show are very inclined to use language to show equality with each other, which was shown 45 times in the mid-season of the first season. So, the linguistic characteristics of the female characters in the show are in line with the equality characteristics in Julua wood's theory of female linguistic characteristics.

4.1.2. Good at asking questions

According to Julua wood, the second characteristic of women's language is being good at asking questions, a trait that can help women better explore the other person's emotions and promote better understanding, such as "How did you feel when it happened?" "Do you think it was intentional?". Another scholar, Beck, argues that women's conversations in the form of asking questions will enable them to better understand the other person's views and perspectives on the topic under discussion. In addition, women asking questions represents their attempts to initiate a conversation and maintain it on an ongoing basis (Beck, 1988). Examples are as follows.

Devi: So why are you at this lame-fest? Shouldn't you be at Stanford, like, playing frisbee with a computer?

Harish: I actually really wanted to come.

Devi: To Ganesh Puja? At a public high school in the Valley? Are you insane? Tell me the truth. Did they send you home on medical leave? Are you suicidal from Accutane?

Harish: Look, I know I used to clown on this every year, but the truth is, I kinda miss puja.

Devi: Are you kidding? When I get into Princeton, I'm never coming back. I'm gonna be an atheist, who eats cheeseburgers every day with my white boyfriend.

Harish: I thought I'd be that way too, but it was different when I went to college. My roommate, Nick, is Native American, and he's so into being Native American. At Frist, I was like, "You're away from your parents. You don't have to pretend to care about your

ancestry or whatever." But then he took me to their campus powwow. No one was standing in the corner making fun of it. They were dancing and chatting, and having a

great time, and it made me think, "Why do I think it's so weird and embarrassing to be Indian?"

Devi and Harish are both Indian, Devi is female and Harish is male. On the day of the traditional Indian festival of puja, the two meet at Devi's school and have a conversation as seen above. In this conversation, they shared their inner thoughts about the festival. What is noteworthy is the way they express their thoughts in the conversation. We can see that Devi, the female, uses a lot of questions in the conversation, while Harish, the male, uses declarative sentences throughout the conversation. The difference between the males and females in their ability to ask questions is obvious, as Devi not only indirectly expresses her disdain for Puja by asking a lot of questions, but also facilitates communication between the two by asking questions and giving the males a chance to express their ideas. Harish, on the other hand, uses declarative sentences throughout, with the exception of one question at the end of the sentence (Harish's last uttered question is not a question to Devi, but rather an introduction to his own internal questioning of himself, triggered earlier by his housemate). In addition to this dialog, to make the data more credible, the authors also counted the number of times men and women in the show used interrogative sentences. The data is presented below.

Table 2

Number of times a character uses questionable sentences	
Gender	Times
Female	168
Male	43

From the table above, we can see that women use questions for conversation very frequently, up to 168 times. It is enough to see that women often keep the conversation going in the form of asking questions. Therefore, the linguistic characteristics of the female characters in the play are in line with the characteristic of being good at asking questions in Julua wood's theory of female linguistic characteristics.

4.1.3. Positive response

The third characteristic of female language according to Julua wood is positive response. Positive response can also be understood as a characteristic of supporting others. In order to make this support clear, participants often tend to output words of positivity that show understanding or empathy for others' situations and feelings. Women often respond positively to what others say and in this way will acknowledge others' opinions and encourage the other party to further elaborate on their point of view. For example, a woman might say, "That's interesting." to show that she is actively engaged in the conversation. An example is as follows:

Devi: Trent, did you do the logo?

Trant: Yeah. The B stands for Bunkr.

Devi: Nice. Totally. I'm just concerned it's a little simple. Maybe we could add a person hiding inside the B.

Trant: Nah. That sounds busy. I like mine.

Trant: What if there's an app that turns your phone into a gun? Then you can kill the Nazis with your gun. Bam. War is over.

Devi: So, like, how would your app turn your phone into a gun?

Trant: Same way Transformers work. You just push a button, and it does it.

Devi: Okay. Good idea, Trent.

This conversation is between Devi and Trant before the debriefing to complete the group task assigned by the teacher. We can see from the intonation and tone of the female lead that Devi is not very satisfied with Trant's proposal and tries to propose her own changes to the assignment, but the female lead still responds positively to the other person's opinion, responding with affirmative words such as nice and good idea as a way to show that she is listening to the other person's opinion and showing respect to the other person's point of view. In addition to these affirmative words, women often respond positively through intonation, and Bloomfield suggests that women are more likely than men to use exclamatory expressions, including words like yeah, dear me, oh dear, gracious, and goodness (Bloomfield, 46). After counting the number of times males and females in the play responded positively to the communicator, including positivity words and exclamations, the results in the table below were obtained:

Table 3

characters engage in a positive sexual response	
Gender	Times
Female	103
Male	21

As we can see from the data in the table, women in the show also often engage in positive sexual responses, and this response occurs not only in conversations with men, but it is also common in conversations with women. It occurs 103 times in this season. Therefore, the linguistic features of female characters in the drama are in line with the positive response features in Julua wood's theory of female linguistic features.

4.1.4. Tentativeness

According to Julua wood, the fourth major characteristic of female language is tentativeness. She points out that women will express their thoughts in a vaguely tentative way from time to time. For example, "I think you might be overreacting." Most of the time when women express this statement, they add an adverb of degree (probably, possibly) or otherwise make the language uncertain, making it more "harmless". (wood, 1993) In response to this feature, wood argues that women usually show their tentativeness through the verb, intonation and rhetorical questions of a sentence. In this thesis, we focus on the tentative verbs used by women in sentences. Specifically, women often use words such as I think, I believe, I feel, I guess, I mean, I wonder, well, maybe, probably, kind of. Such expressions can weaken the certainty of a discourse by showing the speaker's self-distrust and confidence, thus making it sound less unconditional and safer, and more comfortable for the listener.

Eleanor: We saw her. She's been living here, working at a Mexican restaurant in Encino. The postcards were nothing but a charade.

Devi: What? Oh, my God. What did you say to her?

Eleanor: Nothing. I ran away. She called and texted, but Jonah said that I should ignore her because she's a liar who committed postal fraud. He thinks we need to keep toxic people out of our lives. When he said that, he was talking about you, but I think it applies here too.

Devi: Well, some might say Jonah is a little toxic...specifically towards lifelong female friendships. I think you should talk to you mom and find out why she's here.

Eleanor: Mom, what are you doing here?

Eleanor's mom: Devi said that I should come and speak to you in person.

Eleanor: So you thought you would just show up in the middle of the day at my school?

Eleanor's mom: Yeah. I thought it could be like a fun study break.

The first dialog above is between Devi, the heroine, and her friend Eleanor. Previously they had a small conflict, but with Devi's efforts, their relationship has been eased, this conversation is after the relationship has been eased Eleanor told Devi about her mom cheating on her. We can see that the two women mostly use tentative verbs, such as I think and might, to express their ideas euphemistically; the second conversation is that Devi suggests that Eleanor's mom go and talk to Eleanor in order to ease the relationship between mother and daughter, and then Eleanor's mom suddenly shows up in the school to have a conversation with Eleanor. conversation. In this passage, both women also use I think. However, it is observed that the males in the play are less likely to use this tentative verb, and they will directly use declarative sentences to express their thoughts directly and decisively. By counting the number of times the male and female characters used tentative verbs in their expressions in the first season, the results in the table below were obtained:

Table 4

characters use an ambiguous verb	
Gender	Times
Female	182
Male	47

From the table we can see that both males and females use ambiguous verbs more often than the previous features. This shows that female language fits well with the characteristic of being tentative.

4.2. Are there differences in the linguistic characteristics of the female and male characters in the play? What are the differences?

From the four tables listed above, it can be seen that the language differences between male and female are still obvious. According to Julia Wood's theoretical framework of female language, the author observes and researches the speech of male and female in the play from four aspects: equality, good at asking questions, positive response, and tentativeness, and makes statistics. From the above statistics, it can be seen that the speech of contemporary female high school students still conforms to these four characteristics, and dialogic examples can be identified in the play.

The first is equality. As can be seen from the data in Table 1, the number of times males in the play use their speech to show equality to each other is 6, while the number of times females use their speech to show equality with each other is 45. Females use their speech to reach a kind of equality with their interlocutors more often than males do. Women often use language to show that they are equal to the other person by showing that they think the same way as the other person in order to bring them closer together and to show that they understand what the other person is thinking. Men use this behavior much less frequently, which the authors attribute to the fact that men have a lower need to maintain friendships and they do not do so by reaching a consensus or finding common ground, whereas women tend to talk to build and consolidate friendships. They are happy to share their feelings, experiences, fears and problems in everyday life in order to get to know each other better, so this trait is more common among women.

Secondly, they are good at asking questions. From the data in Table 2, it can be seen that men use questions to keep the conversation going a total of 47 times in the drama, while women use them 168 times, and women ask more questions than men. Women are good at asking questions in order to explore others' thoughts and feelings, and will frequently use questions in the conversation and keep the conversation going by asking questions to the other person, while on the contrary, men will use a lot of declarative sentences, mostly answering the other person's questions and expressing their own conceptual ideas, and seldom asking questions to the other person. The contrast between the two is still evident from the table. The authors attribute this to the fact that males are used to just expressing their own ideas and do not have a great curiosity about other people's opinions and viewpoints. Women, on the other hand, are good at leading, and when men and women are having a conversation, women often can't help but take on that active role of keeping the conversation going until the topic is over or the woman doesn't want to have another conversation.

Thirdly, there is the positive response. From the data in Table 3, it can be seen that women are more likely than men to respond positively to the interlocutor, with a total of 103 responses from women, while the number of responses from men is less, only 21. In fact, both males and females responded positively to each other's remarks, but girls responded much more often than boys. Girls not only respond to each other through positive words, such as oh my god; that's great, but also use a lot of intonation to respond positively, such as yeah; wow, whereas men mostly use some positive words, such as cool; that's cool, but the overall number of times is not

much, and they seldom use intonation to respond. The author believes that this is because females are more likely to use positive words than males, and they rarely use intonational words. The author believes that this is because women are more emotional than men, and are better able to capture the emotional feedback that the other party wants and give a corresponding response, while men are more concerned about their own dialog logic and inner thoughts in the conversation, and are more inclined to express their inner thoughts.

The last is tentativeness. As can be seen from the data in the last table, the number of times females show tentativeness in their speech is 182 times and males 47 times, and females show this feature in their conversations much more often than males. The fact that women use these tentative verbs a lot in their speech reflects the fact that women are willing to broaden the conversation by communicating more openly and at the same time accepting the views and opinions of others, whereas men use less ambiguous vocabulary, and they all express their concepts and ideas directly in the form of simple sentences.

5. Conclusion

From the analysis of the fourth major point of data research and comparison, the following conclusions can be drawn: 1. The women's language in the play basically has the characteristics of women's language mentioned in Julia Wood's theoretical framework, which are equality, posing questions, responding positively, and probing, and the frequency is high. 2. There is still a big difference between men's language and women's language. In the drama, the four characteristics of equality, asking questions, responding positively and probing also appear in the male speech occasionally, but the frequency is low. The male tends to use declarative sentences to express his own conceptual ideas directly, and seldom asks questions to the other party, and his language is more direct and lacks ambiguity.

The subjects of this paper are females and males in high school, and the conclusions drawn through observation and comparative study can enrich the views of many scholars on this aspect of women's linguistic expression characteristics and provide reference value for other scholars' research; this study helps people to understand the western thought and culture, and familiarize themselves with the principles and strategies of cross-cultural communication; this study reveals that the contemporary young male and female English-speaking women's This study reveals the communication styles of contemporary young men and women who use English, which can help avoid conflicts caused by misunderstanding of the language and improve mutual understanding between men and women. However, this study is still flawed, the research material is only the first quarter, and the data sample is not rich enough, so the author will continue to improve it in the future research.

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