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ABSTRACT

This study examined discourse strategies used by males and females to convey embarrassing information to interlocutors of unequal status and unspecified gender. Subjects were 80 native speakers of Turkish (28 males, 52 females), from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic areas. Data were derived from a written discourse completion test and a background questionnaire. Test responses were analyzed for semantic and syntactic formulas used and variation in sociolinguistic norms in relation to speaker's gender and social status relative to the other interlocutor. Results suggest it is not so much gender but relative status of the interlocutors that influences choice of semantic formula. Males and females showed similar sociolinguistic behavior in their social status groups rather than in their gender groups in carrying out a face-threatening speech act in Turkish, indicating social status to be a more influential factor than gender on language use in this act. Implications for communication and language instruction are examined, emphasizing that the interaction of sociolinguistic variables that may constrain social interaction should not be oversimplified. (Author/MSE)

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# Gender Differences in Conveying Embarrassing Information: Examples from Turkish

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Abstract

This paper presents research on discourse strategies used by males and females in conveying embarrassing information to interlocutors of unequal status and of unspecified gender. It thus compares and contrasts linguistic behavior of men and women of different statuses in a face-threatening speech situation, using data collected from native speakers of Turkish.

Data was collected via role plays in discourse completion tests and analyzed by uncovering the semantic and syntactic formulas Turkish males and females use in this speech act. Variation in sociolinguistic norms was investigated in relation to the gender of the speaker and the relative social status of the interlocutors. The relative weights of gender and social status, thus power, were compared as these social variables interrelated with interactional patterns.

Results show that it is not so much the gender but the relative status of interlocutors that influence their choice of semantic formulas. Males and females display similar sociolinguistic behavior in their social status groups rather than in their gender groups in carrying out a face-threatening speech act in Turkish, indicating social status, thus power, to be a more influential social factor than gender on language use in this particular act. Results are discussed toward assisting communication and language teaching, by emphasizing that considerations of the interaction of sociolinguistic variables that might constrain social interaction should not be oversimplified, as we can achieve better language acquisition and greater mutual understanding only by recognizing the complexity inherent in language use.

## Introduction

Gender differences in language use have been a focus of attention since the 1970s. Comparison and contrast of males and females' use of language as well as the language used to refer to members of the two sexes started off with discussions based on intuition and casual observation, leading to many stereotypical beliefs and assumptions about the way men and women speak. Parallel to Jespersen's (1922) comments on women's speech as being a deviant form of the average male speaking patterns, Lakoff (1973) described 'women's language' as having more adjectives such as "adorable, sweet, lovely, and divine" whereas adjectives such as "great, terrific and neat" were more neutral as to the gender of the speaker. It was also claimed that women were more polite and conscious of hurting others, thus apologize more frequently and that they are soft-spoken and non-aggressive (ibid.).

The coincidence of Lakoff's work, *Language and women's place* (1973), with the beginning of Women's Liberation Movement in early 70s accelerated the already existing concerns about the language behavior of men and women and issues of power and dominance determined by gender. The resulting research has grown in two directions: Those concerned with sexism in language, particularly the English language, investigated linguistic forms such as address terms, terms of endearment, the generic use of 'he', and referential asymmetries, among others. The second group investigated gender-related speech differences to test stereotypical assumptions about male and female language use. The outcome was an

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impressive range of empirical studies on language and gender, as reported in works by Zimmerman and West, 1975; Swacker, 1975; Eakins and Eakins, 1976; Crosby and Nyquist 1977; Brouwer, Gerritsen and DeHaan, 1979; O'Barr and Atkins, 1980; Edelsky, 1981; Thorne, Kramrea and Henley, 1983; Philips, Steele and Tanz 1986; Cameron and Coates, 1988; Penfield, 1987; Wolfson 1984, 1989; Holmes 1988, 1989; Poynton, 1989; Freed, 1992; Coates 1993; Freeman and McElhinny, 1996, among others.

Data reported in the above collections proved that gender-related stereotypes were quite incorrect and misleading and especially damaging for females, while ascertaining gender-related differences in language use. In an earlier study by Crosby and Nyquist (1977), moreover, it was found that Lakoff's description of features considered part of women's speech were actually the style used by the powerless people regardless of gender. Brower, Gerritsen and DeHaan (1979) also showed that the speech features that Lakoff attributed to women were employed by both males and females, though when only addressing women. Such studies reveal quite clearly that due to their relatively powerless roles in society, characteristics of what is considered to be 'women's language' are stigmatized and seen as somewhat 'less important' or 'less correct' than men's language, though such descriptions have never been clearly defined and operationalized in empirical research. This view exemplifies the dominance model in gender research where studies show male dominance in language due to political and cultural subordination of women. Later studies subscribe more to the difference, or the dual-culture, model by acknowledging that men and women use language differently as though they belong to different subcultures in a society. This duality in return leads to miscommunication (i.e., Tannen 1990). For details on the two models readers are referred to Freeman and McElhinny (1996).

It is not possible to do justice to the body of research on language and gender in the course of a paper, thus interested readers are referred to the above cited volumes/articles for details. Yet, suffice it to say that, in general, today it is accepted that there are differences both in the way males and females interact and in the language used to refer to the members of the two sexes. "Sex varieties ... are the result of different social attitudes towards the behavior of men and women, and of the attitudes men and women themselves consequently have to language as a social symbol" (Trudgill, 1974, p. 94). Also, these are usually reflections of the particular societies' culture and provide important information for intercultural and interethnic communication, helping to ease misunderstanding thus communication breakdowns. Such information on the societally appropriate norms of interaction and interpretation also provide crucial assistance for language teaching and materials preparations in our goal of equipping our students with communicative competence in the target language.

Despite the considerable body of research showing significant differences between the way men and women communicate, in addition to the words and expressions used to refer to men and women, it has not been possible to investigate all aspects of language use by the two genders across diverse languages, due to the complexity of language and its many

subcomponents. Moreover, the emphasis has been on the English language, thus restricting cross-cultural comparisons.

In the domain of speech act studies, the concern of this paper, there has been a number of studies attempting to reveal how males and females use these minimal units of interaction (e.g., Herbert, 1986; Holmes, 1989; Wolfson, 1984). Holmes (1989), for instance, found that women employ significantly more apologies than men and they make use of more apology strategies among their own gender while this is not the case for men, therefore, providing support for Lakoff's (1973) earlier claims. In another study, Herbert (1986) found significant differences between the way men and women compliment e.g., women offered more personal compliments than men and their compliments were primarily in the first person whereas this feature hardly existed in men's speech. Wolfson's research on compliments also empirically showed men's tendencies to give accomplishment-oriented compliments while women complemented each other more on appearance-related matters (see Wolfson 1989 for a summary of her research). Such differences in language behavior between males and females led to misunderstandings in turn.

## The Study

As aforementioned, information on speech act use of different sexes from different cultures is lacking in the literature. In this paper we set out to contribute to the bridging of that gap by focusing on a speech act which had not been studied in relation to gender thus far and which also has a culturally-constrained use, as it relates to the values and taboos of the speech community in question. We will be looking at the strategies (semantic formulas) Turkish males and females utilize in conveying embarrassing information to someone of unequal status and of unspecified gender (see footnote 1). Our main concerns are to reveal some sociolinguistic norms of Turkish, a language which has not been the subject of much sociolinguistic or gender research (except for Özçalışkan's 1994 work on use of expletives by Turkish males and females), while investigating the impact of gender and status differences on language use in a particular situation. Specifically, the main study questions are

1) How do Turkish males and females convey embarrassing information to status unequals ? That is, what are the differences and/or similarities between Turkish males and females in executing the same speech act, in terms of the semantic and syntactic formulas used ?

2) What are the relative impacts of the speaker's gender and the hearer's social status in shaping people's speech behavior ? That is to say, which social variable, i.e., social status or gender, overrides in the speech act of conveying embarrassing information ?

## Method

Data was collected from 80 native speakers of Turkish (28 males and 52 females) who came from different parts of Turkey and from different socioeconomic backgrounds, via a written discourse completion test (DCT). A background questionnaire showed that subjects

were quite representative of young Turkish people from various socio-economic backgrounds, from both urban and rural areas, and that they were all native speakers of Turkish with insignificant exposure to other cultures and languages other than in their foreign language courses.

DCTs are frequently used instruments for collecting data on language use and for creating an initial classification of semantic formulas. They are especially effective in revealing the norms and communicative expectations of the subjects in a given situation, though they might fail to show the extended range and nuances of formulas. DCTs were chosen over natural observations for the purposes of this study due to the following reasons: By virtue of the nature of information sought, that is, conveying embarrassing information, it was very difficult if not impossible to gather observational data as this speech act does not seem to occur that frequently (see Holmes 1989; Beebe and Takahashi 1989, for their reported problems). Secondly, we are interested in the social norms governing people's language use and DCTs are very useful in collecting such data in a controlled manner. In the DCTs we controlled for the status and the gender factor by presenting the subjects with situations addressing interlocutors of higher and lower status than themselves. We were more interested in investigating language use by males and females (rather than looking at language use by males and females to people of same and opposite sex), thus controlled for the identity of the addressee, by making the scenarios gender-neutral, as we reasoned that clues to the gender of the hearer might influence language use. We presented no personal names and as the Turkish language has only a neutral third person singular, *o* for he/she, this posed no problems. It must be noted here that we do acknowledge the gender of the addressee as a very important social factor governing choice of linguistic norms (as ascertained by Holmes 1989), though we chose not to include it in this specific study. The DCT was adapted from Takahashi and Beebe (1993) for the sake of future cross-cultural comparisons. It was translated into Turkish by the researchers and an independent balanced bilingual and then validated by two professors of Turkish and English Linguistics. No changes were made in the situations since they resembled events that Turkish people can encounter in their everyday lives. The cultural validity of the situations involving the conveying of information that was embarrassing for the interlocutors was established by interviewing other native speakers of Turkish (other than the ones taking the DCT) and discussing their sociocultural norms.

As part of a larger research project, subjects responded to the following situations by writing down exactly what they would say in that particular instance. The situations were integrated with eight others and were given in no specific order. They were:

From Higher to lower:

"You are a corporate executive talking to your assistant. Your assistant, who will be greeting some important guests arriving soon has some spinach in his/her teeth."[1].

You: .....

From Lower to Higher

"You are a student, speaking with your professor to prepare for a three-way meeting you have with the Dean of College. Your professor has some mustard on his cheek from lunch and you are aware of it.'

You: .....

Data analysis was done by categorizing the subjects' speech behavior in terms of the semantic formulas they used in executing the speech act in question. The categories given below emerged from the analysis of the data. Then, semantic formulas preferred by people in higher and lower status and by males and females in addressing a status unequal interlocutor were compared and contrasted to find the similarities and/or differences in sociolinguistic behavior across gender and status levels. The test for differences between two independent population proportions, indicated by the Z values on the tables below, was used to determine if the differences across the groups were statistically significant. The p-value was set at .05. Findings are presented and discussed below along with examples. Note that the examples given below are the English translations of the data, as we are interested in the global semantic formulas rather than the specific linguistic details of Turkish. Where the latter carry importance for our analysis, they will be emphasized in their original forms.

## Discourse strategies of Turkish males and females in conveying embarrassing information to status unequals

We will start our discussion by presenting the distribution of the semantic formulas Turkish subjects preferred in conveying embarrassing information to a status unequal (given on Table 1) to reveal the relationship between social status and language use. In the second part of the analysis we will look at the sociolinguistic behavior of males and females in their status groups (given on Table 2) to answer the first study question. Based on these, we will then analyze the relative impacts of status and gender, as two important social variables, in the act of conveying embarrassing information to answer the second study question.

[1] Note that these original situations include he/she thus revealing the gender of the addressee. However, in the Turkish translations 'o', the neutral third person singular was used as the only third person singular pronoun, thus serving very well our purpose of controlling for the identity of the addressee.

*Relative status as a factor in language use*

In the first part of the analysis we looked at the semantic strategies (formulas) that the subjects used to unequal status interlocutors of unspecified genders and our findings can be summarized as follows

**Table 1:** Distribution of semantic formulas by relative status of speakers

| | Higher to Lower | | Lower to Higher | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Semantic Formulas* | N | % | N | % | Z |
| ***Inform Fact*** | | | | | |
| spinach/mustard | 4 | 5.00 | 20 | 25.00 | **3.58[a] |
| something | 12 | 15.00 | 20 | 25.00 | 1.60 |
| smear | -- | -- | 17 | 21.25 | ***4.39 |
| food | 2 | 2.50 | 3 | 3.75 | 0.46 |
| ketchup | -- | -- | 1 | 1.25 | 1.00 |
| ***Suggest H*** [1.] | | | | | |
| to clean teeth | 25 | 31.25 | -- | -- | ***5.50 |
| to visit bathroom | 3 | 3.75 | -- | -- | *1.75 |
| to tidy up self | 10 | 12.50 | -- | -- | **3.28 |
| to look in mirror | 8 | 10.00 | -- | -- | **2.91 |
| ***Hint*** | | | | | |
| Verbal | 8 | 10.00 | 4 | 5.00 | 1.21 |
| Nonverbal | -- | -- | 3 | 3.75 | *1.75 |
| ***Opt out*** | -- | -- | 3 | 3.75 | *1.75 |
| ***Other*** [2.] | -- | -- | 1 | 1.25 | 1.00 |
| **Disqualified**[3.] | 8 | 10.00 | 8 | 10.00 | -- |
| Total | 80 | 100 | 80 | 100 | |

*Notes to the Table*:
a. *: indicates significance level at 0.05
**: indicates significance level at 0.01
***: indicates significance level at 0.001
1. H stands for Hearer (in this case the unequal status interlocutor)
2. Other category contains the one response in which the subject said he/she would wipe the professor's face for him.
3. Disqualified are those responses where subjects described what they would do rather than writing down exactly what they would say in these instances.

The most prominent finding shown by Table 1 is that while the majority of the higher status people (around 57%) made suggestions for an action towards remedying the embarrassing situation, this strategy was not used at all by lower status speakers. Higher status

people of both genders preferred to tell/advise the lower status ones how to deal with the embarrassing situation, as shown by the examples below, while lower status interlocutors preferred informing their superiors of the embarrassing item with little variation (see examples 14-15)

(1) "I think you'd better go brush your teeth before the guests arrive."

(2) "You'd better go to the bathroom and tidy yourself up."

This finding can be attributed to the role relationships in these situations such that while it is appropriate for higher status people to suggest courses of action to those lower in status than themselves, the reverse is not appropriate. A possible reason for this might be that by suggestion an action to a superior, people are also conveying the message that they know better than the higher status person how to deal with a given situation. As this might be perceived as arrogance or even disrespect for the position of the other person, it was not seen as acceptable sociolinguistic behavior. Indeed, when we consider Turkish cultural norms where there is a lot of emphasis and respect to seniority, this finding is not so surprising.

Suggestions given by the higher status interlocutors to lower status ones were generally in the form of questions, thus softening the tone of suggestion.

(3) "Would/could you check your teeth in the bathroom ?"

(4) "Can you please tidy yourself up before the guests arrive, for example, brush your teeth ?"

Suggestions using the structure "It'd be good/better if you/we + action (Verb) (to remedy the embarrassing situation) were very common in the data,

(5) "It'd be good if you clean your teeth." [Dişlerini temizlersen iyi olur]

(6) "You'd better go to the bathroom and tidy yourself up." [Lavaboya gidip kendine bir çeki düzen verirsen iyi olur]

Some suggestions were formulated in the way that both the speaker and the listener clean/tidy/check themselves, possibly as an inclusive politeness strategy used in order not to embarrass the lower status addressee;

(7) "Let's look at the mirror for the last time to check how we look."

(8) "We must leave a good impression with our looks. Let's go wash our hands and face."

In general, higher status people made suggestions to the lower status person to do something as remedial action. Only 7 out of 46 utterances in the suggestions category from the Higher to the Lower status person were in the form of an imperative, ordering the other to do something;

(9) "What is this ? Brush your teeth immediately or we'd be disgraced."

(10) "Brush your teeth immediately."

This finding indicates that in the higher status position Turks do not generally find it appropriate to order those lower status than themselves and they usually redress their words with politeness markers such as question forms, or give a rationale for the suggested action

which is phrased to indicate regard for the positive and negative face of the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987).

An average of about 23% of higher status interlocutors preferred to inform the other person of the embarrassing fact while this was the preferred mode of verbal behavior by about 76 % of the lower status people. Higher status people said;

(11) "You have food pieces in your teeth. (I suggest you clean them. As you know, clean and orderly appearances have great importance in business life.)"

(12) "....., excuse me, but there's spinach left in your teeth."

(13) "(Excuse me, I wanted to warn you.) There's something left in your teeth."

There was much less variation in the responses given by the lower status interlocutors to the higher status interlocutors, irrespective of their genders. The vast majority of the structures used followed the pattern "Address term + there's + something/mustard/stain...+ on your face/cheek" as in

(14) "Sir/Madam, there's mustard on your cheek."

(15) "Sir/Madam, there's a smear on your cheek. Could you check it ?"

Note that the subjects used "Hocam" (my teacher) as a respectful address term and this term is neutral in gender and used to address both male and female teachers. Although almost all lower status people used a respectful address term, this was not reciprocated by the higher status people few of whom used the others' name or in general, preferred a no-naming strategy.

Another semantic strategy Turks used to convey embarrassing information to the other person, albeit sparingly, was hints, both verbal and non-verbal. Higher status people used only verbal hints as follows;

(16) "The spinach must have been nice."

(17) "..... I guess you didn't have time to brush your teeth after lunch."

(19) "Did you eat spinach at lunch ?"

Lower status interlocutors gave both verbal and non-verbal hints, though again not in great numbers;

(20) "Sir/Miss, what did you eat for lunch ?"

(21) "Sir/Miss, your cheek, ..... (uttered while handing out a tissue to the professor)

Three people said that they would just give the professor a tissue, while one person commented that he/she would wipe it off for the professor (category 'other'). It is interesting to note that the only person who would do the remedial action for the hearer was a female.

In short, hints -- a category preferred by Japanese ESL learners of American English (Beebe and Takahashi 1989) -- was not favored much by the Turks, at least in this particular situation, who viewed it more appropriate to "go on record" (Brown and Levinson 1987) and use more direct means of expression. Another mode of action not favored by the subjects was opting out. Only three subjects in the lower status position commented that they would opt out of saying anything.

In sum, a comparison of responses given by higher and lower status people to status unequals in this embarrassing situation reveal that, in general, the higher status people found it appropriate to suggest a remedial, or possibly remedial, action that would lead to self-discovery, thus to likely remedy of the embarrassing situation, possibly due to their higher status that gives them the power to give guidance to the lower status person. Being able to make suggestions to people indicates having the knowledge or the wisdom to offer guidance to others and this seems acceptable in the Turkish culture only when it comes from those superior in status, which can be due to their higher social position or greater age.

Lower status people, on the other hand, do not seem to feel justified in offering 'a piece of their mind' to the higher status people, as doing that would also convey the idea that they know better what to do and this is inappropriate when considering the higher status of the addressee. Indeed, this would be interpreted as being disrespectful in accordance with Turkish sociocultural norms. Thus, the only course of action to take is to inform the higher status addressee directly of the embarrassing fact and let him/her decide how to deal with the issue. This could also explain why the variation found in the responses of the higher status people was not seen in the responses of the lower status people to status unequals, as evidenced by the use of only one type of syntactic structure forming their responses, that is "Address term+there's+item+on your face."

Some lexical differences were observed in the responses of lower and higher status people: Higher status people preferred to call the embarrassing item "something" instead of naming it directly (15% vs. 5%). Lower status people were evenly divided in naming the embarrassing item "something" and "mustard" (25% each), while "smear" was also another lexical item preferred by the lower status interlocutors (21.25%), though not used at all by the higher status ones.

*Gender as a factor in language use*

Another issue of interest in this study was whether there were differences in the ways males and females preferred to convey information that would be embarrassing and thus face-threatening to the hearer. We wanted to see if there were qualitative as well as quantitative distinctions in men's and women's responses to people of unequal status who are in an embarrassing situation. Table 2 presents our findings on the use of the same semantic strategies by people of different status and different genders.

**Table 2:** Distribution of semantic formulas by relative status of the interlocutors and the sex of the speaker

| | Higher to Lower | | | | | Lower to Higher | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | | Female | | | Male | | Female | | |
| *Semantic Formulas* | N | % | N | % | Z | N | % | N | % | Z |
| ***Inform Fact*** | | | | | | | | | | |
| spinach/mustard | 2 | 7.14 | 2 | 3.85 | 0.65 | 10 | 35.71 | 10 | 19.23 | 1.62 |
| something | 5 | 17.86 | 7 | 13.46 | 0.53 | 5 | 17.86 | 15 | 28.85 | 1.08 |
| smear | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1 | 3.57 | 16 | 30.77 | **2.84 |
| food | -- | -- | 2 | 3.58 | 1.05 | 3 | 10.71 | -- | -- | **2.41 |
| ketchup | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1 | 3.57 | -- | -- | 1.37 |
| ***Suggest H*** | | | | | | | | | | |
| to clean teeth | 10 | 35.71 | 15 | 28.85 | 0.63 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| to visit bathroom | 1 | 3.57 | 2 | 3.58 | 0.06 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| to tidy up self | 4 | 14.29 | 6 | 11.54 | 0.35 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| to look in mirror | -- | -- | 8 | 15.38 | *2.19 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| ***Hint*** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Verbal | 3 | 10.71 | 5 | 9.62 | 0.16 | 2 | 7.14 | 2 | 3.85 | 0.65 |
| Nonverbal | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 3 | 5.77 | 1.30 |
| ***Opt out*** | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1 | 3.57 | 2 | 3.85 | 0.06 |
| **Other** | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1 | 3.57 | -- | -- | 1.37 |
| **Disqualified** | 3 | 10.71 | 5 | 9.62 | 0.16 | 4 | 14.29 | 4 | 7.69 | 0.94 |
| *Total* | 28 | 100 | 52 | 100 | | 28 | 100 | 52 | 100 | |

*: indicates significance level at 0.05

**: indicates significance level at 0.01

***: indicates significance level at 0.001

The lack of statistically significant differences between males and females, in terms of the semantic strategies they prefer, in both the higher and lower status roles indicates that males and females display quite similar sociolinguistic behavior regardless of gender in a given social status. Both high status males and females preferred making suggestions to just informing the lower status person of the embarrassing fact. Lower status males and females found it more appropriate to announce the existence of the embarrassing item, as described above.

Yet, there were some exceptions to this general rule: Suggesting the other person to check himself/herself in the mirror was a semantic formula used exclusively by higher status women (15.38%, $Z_o$=2.19, $p<0.05$). Also, it was exclusively lower class females who used nonverbal hints such as handing out a tissue to the higher status person (5.77%). Indeed, all

offers of tissues came from lower status females as they announced the embarrassing item. Certain lexical differences in the execution of the same speech act were also observed between males and females in the lower status role: Lower status females were more likely to call the embarrassing item "something" or a "smear" than naming it directly, whereas the opposite is true for lower status males. "Smear" came out to be a lexical item used exclusively by lower status females (30.77%) with the exception of one lower status male. These might be taken as signs of politeness used by females in this position such that by being ambiguous rather than direct, Turkish females might be softening the tone of their words with the hope of making their utterances less face-threatening.

In short, males and females in the same social position used the same semantic formulas, showing that social status was a more important factor in determining sociolinguistic behavior, at least in this particular speech situation. After finding that the semantic strategies were used quite uniformly across the two genders, we carried out a closer linguistic analysis of the syntactic makeup of males' and females' utterances in the same semantic strategy to examine whether the syntactic makeup of the strategies used were also uniform across sexes. Our analysis indicates that the construction "It'd be good/better if you .....+ suggestion" of an action towards remedying the embarrassing situation is a semantic formula preferred overridingly (17 vs. 3) by higher status females, who used this structure in giving their suggestions. Males, on the other hand, would use this structure in fewer instances, preferring instead to be more straightforward by saying

(22) "Please clean your teeth (before the guests arrive)"

(23) "Go brush your teeth".

In fact, more direct utterances were almost always used by higher status males, as in

(24) "Go and brush your teeth immediately"

(25) "What's this ? brush your teeth at once"

Another linguistic device used more frequently by females were politeness devices such as parenthetical softeners as in

(26) "I think it'd be good if you brush your teeth before our guests arrive"

(27) "I guess you didn't have enough time to brush your teeth after lunch"

(28) "...., you can make the last preparations before our guests arrive. Oh, by the way, there's something between your teeth.'

Also, the all inclusive 'let's' was used by higher status females;

(29) "I guess we both need to brush our teeth now that we still have time"

(30) "We need to leave a good impression with our appearances. Let's both go wash our faces."

Higher status females also combined their announcement of the embarrassing item with a rationale for remedying it, saying things like

(31) "There's food left between your teeth, I suggest you clean it. You know, in business life a clean and orderly appearance is very important for the customer" or

(32) "The guests who are coming are very important. I like my company and staff to always be attentive, meticulous, and clean, especially when important guests are due. So please give more attention to your appearance, especially to your teeth.", or in a more subtle fashion

(33) "I want everything to be perfect. Please check yourself out carefully in the mirror, because our guests give importance to even the smallest details."

Some males in higher status positions also used the all inclusive positive politeness marker 'let's' as in

(34) "Friends, soon important people will be arriving. Let's all tidy ourselves and clean up , if you will.", or softeners such as

(35) "I suppose you left the lunch table in a hurry. But we still have some time. You can go and brush your teeth." a few even hinting,

(36) "Did you eat spinach at lunch ?"

Yet, the number of such utterances with a softened tone was much fewer in male data than it was in female data. In short, females tended to use more politeness markers such as parenthetical softeners and the suggestion formula "It'd be good/better if you .....+ suggestion for remedial action" over direct utterances, and they offered a rationale next to their suggestions. These in turn made their utterances slightly longer (an average of 10.68 words per utterance by higher status females to the 8.92 of higher status males). The use of such markers which are seen as linguistic politeness in the literature (Brown and Levinson, 1987) indicates that females have more concern about hurting the hearer, hence supporting the commonly mentioned view of females being more caring. This should not come as a surprise given women's role in society as the primary caregivers.

More detailed analysis of the utterances of lower status males and females revealed that regardless of gender they used formats such as below, with very little variation. The vast majority used the respectful neutral address term, *hocam* 'sir/miss', and said 'excuse me' in starting their utterances.

(37) "Sir/Miss, (excuse me) + there is mustard/something on your face/cheek."

All in all, our analysis of the sociolinguistic behavior of males and females in announcing some embarrassing information to people of unequal status shows that people belonging to the same social status level use semantic formulas quite uniformly and regardless of their genders. This finding applies to both males and females in lower and higher status roles, thus suggesting that it is not one's gender but social position at a given situation that influences speaking patterns. Thus, in light of the above finding it can be claimed that social status as a variable has greater impact on people's language use than their gender, at least for the speech act concerned. Yet, lexical and syntactic differences in the language use of males and females exist, displaying females' use of more constructions that would be linguistic signs of politeness. It seems that such closer comparisons of the internal structures of males' and females' utterances in the same semantic category warrant more research for providing insights on language use by the two sexes.

## Conclusion and implications

In this study we examined the linguistic behavior of males and females in announcing to an interlocutor of unequal status some fact that is face-threatening by virtue of the information carried. Analysis of data in terms of semantic strategies preferred by the subjects in different roles indicates that higher status people of both sexes prefer suggesting remedial action to the lower status addressee, while lower status men and women prefer to indicate the existence of the embarrassing item, with no advice offered towards a remedy. This in turn is thought to be an outcome of the status and power relationships in this encounter. Another finding is that there does not seem to be much of a difference between the semantic strategies males and females in the same status group use to convey embarrassing information, except for certain lexical differences and politeness markers. The finding that men and women display quite uniform sociolinguistic behavior in a given social role also suggests that the social factor of relative status overrides the gender issue, at least for this particular speech act concerned, because people seem to display linguistic solidarity to their status groups rather than to their gender groups.

This finding is in line with the early studies of Crosby and Nyquist (1977) and Brower, Gerritsen and DeHaan (1979) as discussed above. It also supports O'Barr and Atkins' (1980) study of courtroom interaction where social position, rather than gender, was found to trigger certain linguistic markers as indications of 'powerless language' (that were once believed to be 'female speech'). Kuo's (1994) study of agreement and disagreements between a male psychologist and a female caller to a radio show where " ... power and status, rather than gender, seem to be the primary considerations that determines a speaker's selection of agreement and disagreement strategies." (p.110) also corroborates our findings on strategies for conveying embarrassing information. In terms of conversational behaviors such as interruptions, back-channel cues, and tag questions, as linked to the social variables of gender and power (following the hypothesis that interruptions are critical measures of conversational dominance), Kollock, Burstein and Schwarts' (1985) also show that in male-female interactions the more powerful partner, regardless of gender, interrupts the other significantly more. Furthermore, in a series of studies McElhinny (1993, 1994) reports that male and female police officers share the same interactional styles. All such research show the importance of power and relative status as a sociolinguistic variable that can override other variables like gender, age, context, etc.

In terms of the dominance and difference (or dual-culture) models governing gender research, the findings reported above would not support the latter, while indicating the dominance of social power rather than gender governing language use. At this point of model-making it might be an oversimplification to use gender as the only variable indicative of social dominance or sociolinguistic difference. More research on the relative weights of social factors such as gender, social status, social distance, etc. across diverse situations and cultures are needed for gaining better insights on what kind of factors interact under what kind of

circumstances to influence what we say, where, how, and when. These can then lead to more encompassing models. As Freeman and McElhinny (1996, p. 242) attest, we need to question when gender is relevant and how it interacts with other aspects of social identity in shaping interactional styles. It might well be the case that the context, the particular illocutions speakers are trying to achieve, and the particular image they want to project at a given encounter make gender more or less relevant. If indeed, "it is not talk which varies across context but also the kind of gender identity portrayed by the individuals" (ibid., p. 245), then we need to study how, where, and why gender becomes relevant.

In terms of the implications of our study for language teaching, our findings suggest some important clues. Firstly, suggestions are taught to language learners as the politer and less threatening/imposing means of asking someone to do something, thus are emphasized in the language classroom as preferable when addressing people higher in status. Yet, our findings show that suggestions are not used by the Turks to superiors at all, at least in this particular speech function. In fact, Beebe and Takahashi's (1989) study of native speakers of American English and Japanese in the same situations affirms this finding. Though many textbook writers list suggestions high on their list of appropriate behavior, it seems more acceptable to comment directly on the embarrassing fact and let the higher status hearer decide what to do. In terms of providing language learners with information about socioculturally appropriate behavior in a given situation, such research findings need to be taken into consideration.

Secondly, in the sociolinguistic literature it is commonly mentioned that by using various politeness formulas, such as mitigating devices (*kind of ..., sort of...*) or parenthetical softeners (*I guess, I think, possibly*, etc.), rather than being direct, or using questions and question tags to seek confirmation or agreement from the hearer, (*Don't you think so ?, This doesn't seem correct, does it ?*') we would be behaving in the most appropriate manner. Politeness might be "... the manifestation, through speech, of respect for another's face" (Wolfson 1989:67), yet, sometimes, in certain roles we do not have to use the above politeness markers but be as direct and succinct as possible in order to be appropriate to the context, thus perceived as polite. Being polite, displaying appropriateness sometimes requires short declarative statements and nothing more. Hence, our findings here show that it is not only the structure of utterances but the identities of the interlocutors and the characteristics of the discourse situation that makes certain linguistic structures politer and more socioculturally acceptable in a given context. This provides yet another argument for the study of language in its natural context in order to understand the real, and sometimes implicit, messages people communicate. Such information then needs to be made available to language learners and people engaged in cross-cultural communication.

Thirdly, as advocated by the appropriacy-oriented communicative approaches to language teaching, factors such as gender, social status, social distance, age, context, and the like, are presented in textbooks as if they all equally influence language use in all situations.

This could be an oversimplification in light of research showing that in some situations certain factors override others, while some others might not even be relevant, contrary to expectations. The complexity of the interrelationship of sociolinguistic factors need to be considered in attempting to teach appropriate patterns of social interaction. Serious consciousness-raising is required for our learners to become aware of these subtle nuances of effective interaction.

Furthermore, although both males and females use suggestion as a semantic strategy, they implement it differently. In a higher status position, for instance, females tend to use more politeness forms than males or sometimes different lexical items in executing the same speech act through the same semantic formula. Such research findings must be used as resources in preparing materials for language teaching. We must make sure that we include a range of syntactic formulas that can fulfill a semantic strategy instead of channeling our students towards a single norm. As Judd (1983, p. 236) states in his discussion of the integration of sociolinguistic research findings into language teaching, "If a given set of materials only provides the speech patterns of one sex, then a complete picture of language usage is not provided to the student" One can expand Judd's words to cover the speech patterns of different social and ethnic groups, ages, etc. besides other social dichotomies.

As a final note, in interpreting the findings given above and in applying them for practical purposes, certain factors need to considered. This study does not consider the gender of the addressee which is of great importance in shaping people's words. It is quite expected that there would be some variation in the formulas reported above when they are used to males and females by other males and females in same- and opposite-sex dyads. Furthermore, status equal interlocutors can be added for more in-depth comparisons. Secondly, elicited data obtained via DCTs exemplify people's norms of sociolinguistic behavior, not necessarily their exact words in a particular situation. Although these suffice to answer our research questions, in the future our data can be validated by natural observations. And finally, males and females in different social positions need be observed across different contexts in executing the same speech act to find out whether the physical situation carries importance in shaping our utterances.

All in all, in light of our research and other work accumulating in the domain of sociolinguistics, where social factors such as gender, social status, social distance, age, etc. are investigated, we would like to stress our duty as sociolinguists and applied linguists to show some skepticism about developing teaching materials based on intuitive judgments and even using empirical research that focuses on specific subgroups of the target culture. Though we also acknowledge the difficulty in obtaining such all-encompassing data and the equal complexity of its classroom applications, we would still like to stress that failing to consider these issues will lead to faulty or overgeneralized learning and result in communication problems. No matter how complicated such an endeavor might be, we need to encourage and engage in empirical research to guide us in giving people more acceptable, thus more effective skills and tools of communication.

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