Women's Language: Critical Approaches

## Chapter 7

# Lakoff in context: the social and linguistic functions of tag questions[1]

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the differing linguistic behaviour of women and men. Work in this area has been of two main kinds: either it has concerned itself with phonological and grammatical variation, usually as part of a wider variationist project (e.g. Trudgill 1972; Cheshire 1982) or else it has involved the more 'holistic' exploration of gender-linked speech styles in natural or quasi-natural interaction. The use of politeness phenomena, questions and directives, patterns of floor-apportionment and hearer support are among the speech-style features that have been scrutinised for sex differences (e.g. Brown 1980; Goodwin 1980; Fishman 1980; Zimmerman and West 1975). Here it is this second 'speech style' strand we concentrate on. Drawing on empirical studies we have undertaken, we argue that it is time to reassess certain historical pre-occupations of researchers in this area; and we urge future investigators to be aware of the complexity of relations between linguistic form, communicative function, social context and social structure.

### 2. Work on women's style: the Lakoff hypothesis

Anyone surveying the literature on sex differences in speech style will immediately notice that the work of Robin Lakoff is frequently invoked as a reference point. Lakoff's well known study *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) is a general, wide-ranging discussion, by a linguist, of the English language as it is used by and about women. Originally published in a scholarly

journal, the essay was reprinted in book form and has had considerable exposure and popular success, stimulating discussion both inside and outside linguistics.

From the point of view of today's researchers, the major drawback in Lakoff's work is its lack of any empirical basis. Rather than collecting corpora of male and female speech, Lakoff made claims based on her own intuitions and anecdotal observation of her peers' language use. Many of these claims have, not surprisingly, proved contentious. Yet, despite criticisms of Lakoff's methodology, the set of features she somewhat arbitrarily selected as markers of women's speech style continue to figure in research on sex differences. Because of the importance of *Language and Woman's Place* (*LWP*) at a time when the field had yet to establish itself, many later researchers apparently felt obliged to begin their own investigations with the so-called 'Lakoff hypothesis'. In some cases, especially in the mid-1970s, these researchers were specifically concerned to *test* the hypothesis. But even later on, as it became clear that matters were more complex than Lakoff had suggested, researchers did not always abandon the features to which *LWP* first drew attention. We shall see how this obsession with a particular set of features (and indeed with the question of whether Lakoff's substantive claims were right) has tended to leave important issues unresolved.

To start with, though, what exactly is the 'Lakoff hypothesis'? We can deal with it in two parts: substance and explanation. The substantive claims have to do with the existence of a typical female speech style. This style is marked, at least among educated North American English speakers, by the use of certain linguistic features such as hesitations, intensifiers and qualifiers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, 'trivial' lexis and 'empty' adjectives.[2] What links these rather disparate linguistic phenomena is their alleged common function in communication: they weaken or mitigate the force of an utterance. For instance, Lakoff equates rising intonation on declaratives with showing tentativeness; tag questions are associated with a desire for confirmation or approval which signals a lack of self-confidence in the speaker. Qualifiers and intensifiers function in discourse as hedges. Thus Lakoff would assert that

(1a) *It's a nice day isn't it* (+ TAG)

is less assertive than just

(1b) *It's a nice day* (− TAG)

and analogously that

(2a) *I don't really want it* (+ QUALIFIER)

is less forceful than

(2b) *I don't want it* (− QUALIFIER).

According to Lakoff, a speaker who uses these mitigating features frequently will appear weak, unassertive and lacking in authority. From her claim that the features are typical of *women's* speech it follows that women appear weak and unassertive.

The association between femininity and unassertive speech is not in Lakoff's view coincidental. Her explanation of why women use a 'nonforceful' style links unassertiveness with social norms of womanhood. In a male-dominated society, women are brought up to think of assertion, authority and forcefulness as masculine qualities which they should avoid. They are taught instead to display the 'feminine' qualities of weakness, passivity and deference to men. It is entirely predictable, and given the pressures towards social conformity, rational, that women should demonstrate these qualities in their speech as well as in other aspects of their behaviour. Furthermore, the situation is self-perpetuating, since girls will tend to imitate the speech of their mothers and the female role models available in society.

Each of the parts of Lakoff's hypothesis seems to us to raise serious analytic issues quite apart from − and indeed prior to − the question of whether any evidence can be found for the substantive claims. Studies taking their cue from *LWP* have too often been preoccupied with its empirical dimension (do women use more of features x, y and z?) to the exclusion of crucial underlying problems. Two problems in particular merit detailed discussion.

## 3. Problems in the Lakoff hypothesis

### 3.1 The form and function problem

The first problem raised by *LWP* is the one we will refer to as the **form and function** problem, and it may be glossed as follows: how far is it possible to identify a recurrent form − say the tag question, or a rising nucleus − with some specific communicative function or meaning? Both Lakoff and her more empirically-minded successors have taken an identity of this kind pretty much for granted. In the case of tag questions, for instance, Lakoff makes it clear that unless a tag requests information unknown to the speaker, it is to be counted as signalling tentativeness and/or desire for approval. Stereotype counterexamples like

(3) *That was a silly thing to do, wasn't it* (parent to child)

spring readily to mind; but more seriously, it seems to us problematic to suggest that the communicative function of a syntactic form is either invariant or analytically transparent in all cases. Studies like our own, which deal with natural data, indicate the absolute necessity of considering forms in their linguistic and social context, not in general, and suggest that we should regard multifunctionality as the unmarked case − that is, in real talk most utterances do many things at once.

If accepted, though, this observation complicate research on sex differences in speech style, since unless we can map linguistic forms onto functions in the way Lakoff does, any claim that women use form x more than men begs the question 'so what?'.

Early attempts to investigate the Lakoff hypothesis empirically (Dubois & Crouch 1975; Crosby & Nyquist 1977) suffer to some degree from their failure fully to confront the form and function problem. Dubois and Crouch, for instance, sought to disprove Lakoff's claim that women use tag questions more often than men. Using data recorded at an academic conference, these researchers found men used tags far more than women. Yet on its own, this finding is surely unilluminating, since although it refutes Lakoff's general claim, it does not reveal why and to what extent she was wrong. Nor indeed does it explain Dubois and Crouch's own findings; for the explanation must depend on an account of what tag questions mean in different contexts. Do academic conferences make men more tentative than usual? Do tags serve some other purpose in a conference setting? Dubois and Crouch quite rightly conclude that in their data, tags do not indicate avoidance of commitment (a function which Lakoff had ascribed to some types of tag). But to deal intelligently with all the alternative possibilities, and with the range of meaning tags have across contexts, requires much greater awareness of the complexity of form-function relations, and the way these interact with context of situation. In the central part of this paper we will return to the form and function problem as it relates to tag questions in different contexts.

### 3.2 The problem of explanation

First, though, we need to examine another problem, this time in Lakoff's explanatory framework. As we have noted, Lakoff relates unassertive female speech to the norms of femininity which follow in turn from women's subordinate social position. While this is a plausible enough account, it is not the only possible one; it raises, in particular, the theoretical issue of whether

gender role ('femininity') and status (defined in terms of a cluster of features like age, social class, sex, position in occupational and other hierarchies) should be conflated – and if not, whether one is more important than the other in determining or influencing an individual's speech style. Put crudely, is 'women's language' a consequence of being female, or of being subordinate, or some mixture of the two?

This is not an issue to which Lakoff is able to devote much discussion: it is clear that for her the most important aspect of 'women's language' is its association with weakness and subordination, but on the other hand she calls it *women's* language, that is, typical of women rather than other socially subordinated groups. Later writers, however, have reconsidered this: one well-known study (O'Barr & Atkins 1980) explicitly poses the question in its title, '"Women's language" or "powerless language"?'.

O'Barr and Atkins studied the speech of male and female witnesses in a Carolina courtroom. They were looking for features of Lakoff's 'women's language': exaggerated polite forms, hedges, intensifiers and tag questions (though in fact they had to discard this last variable since it turned out that witnesses seldom used interrogative forms). Briefly, when they quantified the use of 'women's language' features, O'Barr and Atkins found them not to be typical of all women, nor to be confined to the speech of women only. A better determinant of whether some individual scored highly on the features was his or her status, both in general (social class and occupation) and in relation to local courtroom norms (that is, experienced witnesses gained status from their knowledge of the expected procedure, and this showed up in their mode of speech). Several professional women who appeared as expert witnesses had lower scores than a number of men (i.e. used fewer 'women's language' features), while unemployed and blue-collar male speakers scored higher than a number of women. The high-scoring women tended to be unwaged 'housewives' or to be employed in low-status jobs.

O'Barr and Atkins concluded that 'women's language' is something of a misnomer: what they and Lakoff had been dealing with was a status-linked variety or 'powerless language'. The positive, though not overwhelming correlation they found between this variety and women speakers should arguably be explained as a consequence of the fact that women on average occupy lower status positions than men; nevertheless, the important factor is status rather than sex *per se*.

At the other end of the explanatory spectrum from O'Barr and Atkins, and implicitly from Lakoff, are those writers who argue

that male and female speech styles are not primarily determined by power and status, preferring to see sex differences as deriving from the gender-specific subcultures that are formed in childhood play.

One article often cited in support of this position is Goodwin's (1980) study of children's directives in two Philadelphia peer groups. Goodwin's study relates directive usage to the differing organisation of male and female single-sex groups. Male peer groups are organised as hierarchical structures, and the resulting asymmetries in individual status are reflected in which boys use directives, and how: leading group members issue direct imperatives like *Gimme the pliers*, whereas subordinate members avoid such forms completely. Girls' peer groups are organised along different lines; there is less asymmetry and fewer direct commands are used. Instead the girls favour *suggesting* moves, commonly realised by the linguistic element *let's*.

Goodwin's findings fit in well with the folklinguistic belief that men have an aggressive and competitive speech style whereas women tend more to co-operative speech. The two sets of tendencies are sometimes said to be particularly marked in the 'natural' setting of single-sex talk (natural in the sense that for most children it is single-sex talk and play which are formative – the single-sex mode is the earliest they learn). Although on the face of it this point of view resembles Lakoff's since it also relies heavily on a notion of quite rigid and divergent gender roles which the sexes act out, there is a crucial difference in evaluation between followers of Lakoff and the 'subculture' theorists. For Lakoff, women's style is *deficient*, lacking authority and assertiveness. For subculture theorists like Jones (1980) it is *different*, but not deficient, and may indeed possess virtues of its own. The desire of some analysts to revalue what is thought distinctively female in speech style leads to an explanation of women's language not as the deplorable result of male dominance, but as a positive manifestation of female culture and values.[3]

The subcultural approach has been applied to miscommunications and interactional conflicts between women and men. Instead of regarding these as local instances of a more general power struggle, theorists like Maltz and Borker (1982) regard them as comparable to the misunderstandings which arise between speakers from different ethnic groups, who are often unaware that they are orienting to very different discourse norms. Drawing on the work of Gumperz (1982b), Maltz and Borker argue that women and men also have different discourse norms, since they typically acquire communicative competence

in single-sex peer groups. An example they give is the interpretation of minimal responses, which women use more frequently than men (Hirschman 1974; Fishman 1980). For women, they say, these responses mean 'I hear you', whereas for men they mean 'I agree with you'. Thus women and men have different expectations about the incidence of minimal responses in talk. They tend to misinterpret each other, and this leads to frustration and communicative breakdown.[4]

The 'culture' versus 'power' argument is a significant one for researchers in the area of sex differences in speech style. We would argue, however, that it has often been posed in an over-simple way. On one hand, it is surely implausible to claim that the gender-specific subcultures posited by some analysts are quite independent of power structures. Can it be coincidence that men are aggressive and hierarchically-organised conversationalists, whereas women are expected to provide conversational support? On the other hand, the content of any group's speech style is unlikely to be reducible to their position in the social order. We will need to consider this whole debate further in the empirical case studies to which we now turn.

## 4. Empirical case studies

### 4.1 The tag question
The linguistic feature chosen here as a case study is one which has really got into the bones of the debate on language and sex since it was originally discussed by Lakoff, and we have had occasion to allude to it several times already in our theoretical discussion (above): the tag question. The idea that women use more tag questions than men because tags in many contexts indicate tentativeness and approval-seeking has passed out of the domain of academic speculation and into folklinguistic common sense, not excluding the folklinguistic common sense of feminists. How useful and accurate this view of tag questions is will now be considered using two separate studies of contrasting data bases.

### 4.2 Tag questions in casual conversation
#### 4.2.1 Aims of the study
The first study is based on a corpus of nine texts of 5,000 words each from the Survey of English Usage (SEU) conversational corpus based at University College, London. Three texts involved male speakers only, three female speakers only, and

three speakers of both sexes. Some 25 speakers were sampled altogether, the constraints of the SEU (which set out to collect examples of 'educated' British English usage, i.e. middle-class, mostly southern and overwhelmingly white English speech) ensuring a relatively homogeneous group in terms of social status. The aim of the study was to discover what sex differences, if any, existed in this group's use of tag questions.

Tag questions were defined formally as grammatical structures in which a declarative is followed by an attached interrogative clause or 'tag' where the first element of the declarative's AUX component (or dummy DO), usually with its original polarity reversed, and a pronoun coreferential with the original subject NP are 'copied out' – as in, for instance:

(4) *You were missing last week / weren't you* (SEU)

or, with polarity constant rather than reversed:

(5) *Thorpe's away / is he* (SEU).

Examples of tag questions from the 45000 words sampled were further coded for variation on a number of formal features: position (utterance-initial vs. utterance-medial), polarity (constant vs. reversed) and intonation (rising ($/$) vs. falling ($\backslash$) tone).

In addition to this formal analysis we attempted a functional classification of the tag questions in our data. Given our criticisms of mindless quantification, we were anxious to avoid merely comparing women's total usage of tags with men's without first ascertaining that they were using the structure in comparable ways; we were also interested in challenging Lakoff's very cut and dried, restrictive view of tag questions' functions: that unless they request information unknown to the speaker they should be treated as 'illegitimate', markers of tentativeness, a sign that the speaker has 'no views of his [sic] own' (Lakoff 1975: 17). This view has recently also been challenged by the New Zealand linguist Janet Holmes.

#### 4.2.2 Analysing tag questions: the work of Holmes
Holmes (1984) is very much aware of what we have labelled the 'form and function' problem. She notes (1984: 52) that in discussions of sex differences in speech style:

> Most investigators have simply counted linguistic forms and compared the totals for women vs. men with very little discussion of the functions of the forms in the context of the discourse in which they occur.

In elucidating these functions, Holmes suggests (1984: 50):

> at least two interrelated contextual factors need to be taken into
> account, namely the function of the speech act in the developing
> discourse, and the relationship between the participants in the
> context of utterance.

Holmes's own analysis distinguishes two main functions of tag questions which she calls **modal** and **affective**. Modal tags are those which request information or confirmation of information of which the speaker is uncertain; in Holmes's terms they are 'speaker-oriented', i.e. designed to meet the speaker's need for information. Examples of this type from the Survey data include:

(4) *You were missing last week / weren't you* (SEU)

(6) *But you've been in Reading longer than that / haven't you* (SEU).

'Affective tags' by contrast are addressee-oriented: that is, they are used not to signal uncertainty on the part of the speaker, but to indicate concern for the addressee. This concern can take two distinct forms. On one hand, it can exemplify what Brown and Levinson (1978) call 'negative politeness': a speaker may use a tag to 'soften' or mitigate a face-threatening act. Holmes gives the example:

(7) *Open the door for me, could you*

where the baldness of the directive is mitigated by the tag, and the face-threat to the addressee correspondingly reduced. Tags used in this way are referred to by Holmes as 'softeners'. On the other hand, concern can be directed to the addressee's positive face: rather than merely reducing possible offence, a tag may be used to indicate a positive interest in or solidarity with the addressee, and especially to offer her or him a way into the discourse, signalling, in effect, 'OK, your turn now'. Holmes labels this kind of tag 'facilitative'. Examples from the Survey data include:

(8) *His portraits are quite static by comparison \ aren't they* (SEU)

(9) *Quite a nice room to sit in actually \ isn't it* (SEU).

It is precisely this kind of 'facilitative' tag which Lakoff would read as 'illegitimate', a covert request for approval. The speakers of (8) and (9) express personal opinions and value-judgements which in no way require confirmation from anyone else. Indeed, for an addressee to disagree or withhold agreement here would

be markedly and noticeably unco-operative. Thus Lakoff would hold that the tag is uncalled-for and overly deferential. But Holmes finds this reading unsubtle and unhelpful. Facilitative tags may have no informational function, but they do have an important *interactional* function, that of drawing other participants into an exchange. To call this 'illegitimate' begs the question.

Holmes's analysis of the functions of tag questions allows her to modify the Lakoff hypothesis. As we know from studies like Dubois and Crouch's, it is not invariably true that women use more tags overall than men. But it might be plausible to suggest that they use more tags with affective meaning, especially facilitative tags. Women, after all, are allegedly 'co-operative' conversationalists who express frequent concern for other participants in talk; in mixed interaction it has been suggested that women are expected to do what Pamela Fishman has called 'interactional shitwork', – essentially a talk-facilitation task.

Holmes's own data support this modified hypothesis. She found that in her sample, 59 per cent of women's tags were facilitative compared to 35 per cent which were modal; for men these proportions were more or less reversed, at 25 per cent facilitative tags and 61 per cent modals (the remaining percentage for both sexes is accounted for by softeners, of which men in fact use a higher proportion. For actual values see Table 7.1, section 4.2.4 below).

In our own study we set out to investigate two questions: first, whether the modal/affective distinction could fruitfully be applied to data from the SEU; and second, whether the application of the distinction would yield findings on sex difference similar to those reported by Holmes.

*4.2.3 Applying Holmes's framework to the Survey data*
Although we did eventually classify all tag questions in our sample as either modal or affective, the task was not wholly unproblematic, and this in turn drew attention to difficulties in Holmes's own analysis. It is of interest to consider the problems we encountered, since they show the extent to which all analyses of this kind must inevitably be dogged by the form and function problem.

First of all, it was not always possible to assign specific examples to one or other of the modal and affective categories unambiguously. More precisely, there were instances where it seemed most satisfactory to analyse a tag as having some orientation to

*You were missing last week / weren't you*

We eventually classified this as a modal tag, on the grounds that it called for confirmation of a fact the speaker was not sure of. But arguably it also has an element of the softener about it, since either the bald declarative

*You were missing last week*

or the direct polar interrogative

*Were you missing last week*

would tend to sound like accusations, and thus to threaten the addressee's face. The tag could be perceived as mitigating this face-threat.

It seems to us that examples like (4) underline the essential multifunctionality of utterances in discourse. Linguists have often underestimated the interpersonal, as opposed to referential functions of language (a point also made in a similar connection by Coates 1987); given the importance of 'facework' in interaction, we may doubt whether there is such a thing as a purely modal or speaker-oriented tag question. Holmes's framework, however, compelled us to make a somewhat artificial choice between stressing the modal and the affective aspects of (4) and other similar examples.

Faced with this sort of choice, we were often influenced by the formal feature of rising vs. falling tone (i.e. rising tone, all other things being equal, was taken to signal a genuine, that is modal, question). But this criterion, it should be noted, is hardly infallible. Our sample contained a significant number of counter-examples such as:

> (10) *One wouldn't have the nerve to take that one / would one* (SEU)

where the speaker uses rising tone although he is making a value-judgement like those in (8) and (9), rather than querying a matter of fact (the topic of (10), incidentally, is a nude picture). Conversely

> (11) *The provost is addressing us tomorrow \ isn't he*

seems in context to be a request for confirmation in spite of the falling tone. Overall in our data, 25 per cent of women's tags are modal and 40 per cent of men's; but only 11 per cent of women's tags and 18 per cent of men's have rising tone. So it is clear that the status of a tag as modal cannot simply be read off from its intonation.

To sum up, then, we did find some difficulty in applying Holmes's framework to our data (and we will argue later that the difficulties are compounded if one examines data from contexts other than casual conversation). Tag questions, like other linguistic forms, are characterised by complex multifunctionality and diversity of meaning, so that a certain degree of arbitrariness is to be expected in any functional classification.

#### 4.2.4 Sex-difference findings

The 45,000 words sampled from the SEU gave us a database of 96 tag questions, of which 36 were produced by women and 60 by men. When these 96 tags were analysed as either modal or affective, subject, of course, to the reservations outlined above, the expected sex difference did appear. (See Table 7.1.)

TABLE 7.1  Tag questions in casual conversation

|  | Holmes 1984 | | SEU | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | F | M | F | M |
| Modal | 18 (35%) | 24 (61%) | 9 (25%) | 24 (40%) |
| Affective | | | | |
|   Facilitative | 30 (59%) | 10 (25%) | 27 (75%) | 36 (60%) |
|   Softeners | 3 ( 6%) | 5 (13%) | — | — |
| Total tags | 51 | 39 | 36 | 60 |

It is noticeable that while our findings for women are more decisive than Holmes's – that is, the women in the SEU sample lean even more firmly towards facilitative rather than modal tags – our findings for men's speech are less decisive. Men in the SEU sample used far more facilitative tags than those whose speech was sampled by Holmes. On examination, we discovered an interesting factor which may have skewed the scores for the SEU men: three speakers in our sample texts had been aware that recording was taking place, and these speakers – two of whom were men – had abnormally high scores for facilitative tags. It may be that their speech reflected a concern to elicit as much talk as possible from other participants, in order to generate as much data as possible for the Survey. In other words, these speakers had either consciously or unconsciously taken on the role of conversational 'facilitator'. If their contribution were discounted

altogether, the incidence of facilitative tags among men would fall by around 6 per cent (though this is not enough to account for the considerable difference between our results and Holmes's).

What, if anything, do our findings suggest? One hypothesis which they seem to point towards (though obviously it would need to be more rigorously tested) is that the use of facilitative tags correlates with conversational role, rather than with gender *per se*. Where men take on a facilitating role they are able to produce large numbers of facilitative tags.

Both Holmes (1984) and Fishman (1980, 1983) have claimed that the role of facilitator in conversation is taken on (at least in casual conversation) more frequently and markedly by women than by men. The SEU findings do not necessarily lead us to dispute the validity of that claim. Nevertheless, future research must take very seriously the possibility of an intervening variable between gender and language use. This was one of the points we bore in mind in analysing the data from our second study of tag questions in context.

### 4.3 Tag questions in asymmetrical discourse

Our second study deliberately set out to introduce the variables of conversational role and differential status in addition to the variable of gender which we had considered in the first study. We had a reason for introducing these variables apart from the suspicions raised by the SEU findings: we wanted to pursue certain claims about tag questions put forward not by sex difference researchers but by discourse analysts investigating so-called 'unequal encounters'.

#### 4.3.1 Unequal encounters and the functions of tag questions
If the tag question has been treated fairly unproblematically in sex-difference research as a marker of tentative or 'powerless' language, recent discourse studies are equally unambiguous in citing it as a marker of power and control in talk. Such contradictory positions on the same linguistic form will bear closer examination; we will begin by explaining the discourse analysts' perspective in more detail.

Discourse and conversation analysts of various theoretical inclinations agree that questioning is generally a powerful interactional move, because it obliges the interlocutor to produce an answer (in Conversational Analysis terms the 'second pair-part' of an 'adjacency pair') or to be accountable for its absence. Furthermore, if we consider Gricean principles, a question must

constrain the addressee not only to respond, but to respond in a manner which is conversationally *relevant*: in other words, questions limit what the addressee can say.

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that students of 'unequal encounters' – that is, speech situations where one participant is institutionally invested with rights and obligations to control talk, as in courtrooms, classrooms, consulting rooms and boardrooms, for example – have found that the 'powerful' participants, people like magistrates and doctors, use extraordinarily large numbers of questioning moves in talk.[5] Furthermore, they have noted that 'powerless' participants *avoid* questions: they orient to the rule which says it is their business to produce replies. Where this rule is violated – when a defendant in court asks the magistrate a question, for instance – the response may be silence, interruption or an explicit rebuke to the effect that 'I'm asking the questions here' (Harris 1984).

As well as noting the general interactional power of questions, discourse analysts have pointed out that some types of interrogative by virtue of the grammaticalised and lexicalised expectations they encode, are more constraining than others. For instance, if a question contains a completed proposition, this takes more interactive work to challenge than it does to assent to; the consequence is that respondents tend to produce confirmations of the embedded proposition. Question forms which have this effect are known as 'conducive': and according to analysts like Hudson (1975) and Harris (1984), tags are pre-eminent among conducive question forms. We can see this easily by looking again at the invented example (1a):

> It's a nice day isn't it

a remark which contains the complete proposition *it's a nice day*. It would indeed be odd to reply to this in the negative. The polar interrogative

> Is it a nice day

in contrast is less conducive, permitting either a yes or no answer. This account of tag questions effectively reanalyses them as highly assertive strategies for coercing agreement, and not indications of tentativeness. It helps to explain why tags are so popular with the powerful participants in unequal encounters; Harris, for example, found them strongly favoured by magistrates, who would commonly make remarks along the lines of

(12) *You're not making much effort to pay off these arrears, are you?*

The analysis of examples like (12) incidentally marks another area of disagreement between us and Janet Holmes. Holmes analyses tags in utterances such as (12) as softeners: *are you* supposedly mitigates the extremely negative impact of the accusation *You're not making much effort*. But we would favour an alternative analysis in which the tag was perceived as a way of *increasing* the addressee's humiliation. Not only is the defendant addressed in (12) being accused of bad faith and idleness, he is also being invited (in an extremely conducive manner) to agree with the magistrate's assessment of his behaviour. This and similar examples (cf., for instance, (3) above) remind us of the stereotype military exchange '"You're an 'orrible little man, Smith, what are you?" "An 'orrible little man, sir!"'.

To summarise, then, the 'unequal encounters' strand of work on discourse presents us with an alternative hypothesis to the one usually entertained in relation to tag questions by sex difference researchers. This hypothesis is that tag questions function as an interactional resource of the *powerful* rather than the powerless in conversation. Looking more closely at this possibility might throw light on the problem of explanation (see section 3.2 above). Is women's use of facilitative tags a function of their powerlessness, their role in conversation, or of subcultural norms of female peer groups? (Of course, it is possible that unequal encounters differ markedly from ordinary talk in terms of what tag questions are used to accomplish; the form and function problem must therefore be borne in mind.)

#### 4.3.2 The asymmetrical discourse study

Our second study used a data base of nine hours' recorded unscripted talk from three different broadcast settings: a medical radio phone-in where the participant roles were those of doctor and caller/client; classroom interaction recorded for Open University educational TV, in which the salient roles were those of teacher and pupil; and a general TV discussion programme, in which the roles were those of presenter and audience.

These settings were chosen because they conformed to the criterion for unequal encounters: in each case, one participant was clearly institutionally responsible for the conduct of the talk (and in two out of the three cases, this participant also had more power and status measured in terms of social class, occupation and age; the TV presenter was the exception, since studio audience members and invited guests varied widely in their social status, some of them being on a par with the presenter, others

involved quite varied interactional tasks which we hoped would give interesting insights into the functions of tag questions in different contexts. We sampled the broadcasts in such a way as to balance the numbers of women and men among both 'powerless' and 'powerful' speakers. As in the first study, we picked out all instances of tag questions from the data and analysed them using Holmes's framework of functions. We then broke the results down by the two variables of gender (male vs. female) and power (powerful vs. powerless). The results are shown in Table 7.2.

TABLE 7.2   Tag questions in unequal encounters

|  | Women | | Men | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | *P'ful* | *P'less* | *P'ful* | *P'less* |
| *Modal* | 3 (5%) | 9 (15%) | 10 (18%) | 16 (29%) |
| Affective Facilitative | 43 (70%) | 0 — | 25 (45%) | 0 — |
| Softeners | 6 (10%) | 0 — | 4 ( 7%) | 0 — |
| Total | 61 | | 55 | |

What conclusions can be drawn from Table 7.2? First, we can see that it does support the findings of the previous study and those of Holmes in as much as men score higher on modal tags and women on affective ones, especially facilitatives. In this study it is women who use more tags overall, but at 61 to 55 the difference is not particularly striking.

What *is* striking is the difference between powerless and powerful participants' scores, especially in the affective category. No powerless person of either sex uses either facilitative or softening tags in any of the three settings. On the other hand, in the ening tags in any of the three settings. On the other hand, in the modal category it is powerless speakers who score higher by a proportion of two to one. If we stick to the preconception so prevalent in sex-difference research, that facilitative tags are used by powerless speakers whose subordinate position forces them into 'interactional shitwork', then this pattern is surely rather unexpected. How then can it be explained?

In our view, the results of this second study strongly suppor

associated with the rights and responsibilities of 'powerful' speakers – but this is only true, it appears, of affective or addressee-oriented tags: the use of modal tags to confirm information does not appear to be a 'powerful' move, at least not in all instances. We can provide more detailed support for our conclusions by examining the uses to which different types of tag are put in the asymmetrical discourse sample.

Facilitative tags are most commonly used to get other participants to speak at some length. It is therefore not surprising to find they are favoured especially by the television presenter. Consider, for instance, the following example, in a discussion of why boxing continues to be popular:

(13) PRESENTER: *It's compulsive, isn't it* (elicits long reply from guest).

Softeners, as Holmes observes, mitigate criticism and therefore face-threat to the addressee, as is clear from the following examples:

(14) *You're going to cheat really, aren't you* (teacher to pupil)
(15) *That's a lot of weight to put on in a year, isn't it* (doctor to caller).

But what these examples also make clear is that powerful participants are much more likely to be in a position to criticise in the first place. Criticising is part of the role of teachers, and to some extent doctors; it is not supposed to be the business of pupils or clients, as can readily be appreciated if we try to imagine a pupil uttering (14) or a patient (15).

Modal tags are less clear-cut in their functions; but on close examination an interesting difference emerges between the modal tags used by powerful and powerless participants in our sample. The doctor in particular tended to use them to establish or summarise the facts of a case, cutting off the caller's narrative when this threatened to ramble:

(16) *It's become notorious has it* (doctor to caller, talking about caller's crush on a teacher, the 'problem' she has phoned about).

Powerless speakers by contrast tended to use modal tags in order to request reassurance, particularly in the classroom and medical contexts:

(17) *It is this one isn't it* (pupil to teacher)
(18) *I shouldn't have bothered my GP with it, should I (...)*

The context of situation is obviously relevant here; the higher scores on modal tags obtained by powerless speakers must reflect the fact that our data were taken from two settings in which reassurance is commonly sought.

## 5. Conclusion

What have these two case studies of the tag-question form revealed? First of all, that the relation between linguistic form and communicative function is not a simple thing, and we cannot state *a priori* what tag questions do, even using something like Holmes's modal/affective distinction. This should make future researchers rather wary of the line of argument popularised by Lakoff, that if women use form x more than men we should seek an explanation of this in terms of the invariant communicative function of x.

Secondly, our findings suggest that the patterning of particular linguistic forms may be illuminated by a consideration of a number of variables, not just gender. These include the role taken by participants in interaction, the objectives of interaction, participants' relative status on a number of dimensions, and so on. It needs to be borne in mind generally that 'women' do not form a homogeneous social group. Gender is cross-cut with other social divisions and their relative importance is affected by the specifics of the situation (for instance, in a courtroom or classroom occupational role is likely to be more salient than any other social variable).[6]

Finally, a question which these studies have not resolved, but which in our opinion they certainly pose, is whether the role of conversational facilitator, which appears to favour the use of some types of tag in both casual conversation and unequal encounters, is a subcultural norm of all-female groups, a burden shouldered by subordinate speakers, or a strategy used to control ongoing talk – or, of course, whether it is all of these things at different times and in different settings. The possibility that women's more frequent use of facilitative tags could be a marker of control over conversation rather than one of responsibility for 'interactional shitwork' may appear to go against the grain of feminist studies. But this is surely something that merits a reassessment. One of Lakoff's least helpful legacies is the tendency towards automatically identifying the linguistic strategies used by subordinate groups as *ipso facto* markers of subordinate status.

the conditions of their oppression. Certain aspects of their social behaviour might profitably be analysed not as a simple demonstration of those conditions, but as a complex way of coping with them, or even a mode of resistance to them. In order to move beyond the first phase of language and gender research represented by pioneers like Robin Lakoff, we must develop a more sophisticated view of the complexity of both linguistic and social behaviour.

## Notes

1. This paper is based on two studies of tag questions by Fiona McAlinden (casual conversation study) and Kathy O'Leary (asymmetrical discourse study), respectively. We would like to acknowledge the assistance of Jennifer Coates in designing McAlinden's study. An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Linguistic Circle of Oxford in May 1987, and we are grateful to all who made comments on it there.
2. Obviously, it would not be the case that these particular formal features marked 'women's language' in every speech community, or even in every Anglophone speech community (thus it has been pointed out, for instance, that rising intonation on declaratives is wholly unremarkable in many varieties of English, including Tyneside and Australian, and doubtless similar examples could be found for each of Lakoff's features).
3. Not all analysts who see women's language as related to male dominance would also regard that language as 'weak' or 'deplorable'. Pamela Fishman (1980) holds, for example, that women are skilful conversationalists partly because they are required to negotiate the unco-operative behaviour of dominant males.
4. Unfortunately, however, Maltz and Borker do not follow Gumperz (1982b) in testing out these differing perceptions empirically with samples of informants from male and female groups. Their argument concerning minimal responses cannot, therefore, be taken as proven.
5. 'Powerful' and 'powerless' are in scare quotes here to indicate that they should be taken as descriptions of the relation between participants in the particular setting under consideration, rather than general descriptions. For instance, when a brain surgeon appears before a magistrate charged with a motoring offence, she is 'powerless'; when the judge consults her about his recurrent headache in a medical context, their relative positions are reversed. Their (high) social status in general terms remains the same throughout, however. (On the other hand, it needs to be pointed out that the vast majority

6. Though research suggests this generalisation may not apply to every linguistic feature without exception. For instance, Nicola Woods (Ch. 10) finds that gender is a better predictor of who will dominate the floor than occupational status is, even in a work setting. In the case of interruption, verbosity, minimal response etc., the case for an intervening variable between language use and gender is less persuasive than for tag questions. We do not find this a worrying anomaly, though, since there is no theoretical reason to suppose that all gender-linked differences proceed from exactly the same causal factors.