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Article

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Men, Women, and Politeness

Mytha Candria[a], Sulistya Ningtyas[a], Retno Wulandari[a]

[a]English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, Jl. Prof. Sudarto No.13, Tembalang, Semarang, 50275, Indonesia

mythacandria@live.undip.ac.id

Abstract

The article suggests that there is no straightforward correlation between men, women, and politeness. Women do not necessarily speak more politely than men, nor do men invariably speak more rudely than women. Indeed, the binary division of male and female has frequently been challenged in contemporary scholarship, as such oppositions risk excluding and discriminating against individuals who do not culturally or socially fit into either category. Moreover, politeness is not determined by gender alone; rather it is shaped by a constellation of social factors, including culture, age, social status, race, ethnicity, and educational background.

Keywords: gender; politeness; social factors

1. Introduction

Is it true that women are more polite than men? What is the standard measure used to declare women more polite than men? Is it because women use formal or standard language more often, or because women do not swear and use taboo words as often as men? These are classic questions that often arise in sociolinguistic research on gender and politeness, and, although they have been studied frequently (Holmes, 2001; Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Mills, 2003b), discussions about gender and politeness remain interesting topics to discuss today.

In this paper, we want to discuss gender and politeness, starting from the premise that "stating that women are more polite than men or, conversely, that men are ruder than women" is a simplification. Women and men are not a homogeneous and monolithic group. Instead, they are very diverse and varied. Indonesian women will differ from Malaysian women because they are born and raised in environments with different values, beliefs, and outlooks on life. Even fellow Indonesian women, or fellow Indonesian men, can have different characters. This is because there are factors other than gender that influence a person's politeness in language, such as race, ethnicity, age, education, occupation, social class, socioeconomic background, and family. Therefore, discussions about gender and politeness in language should not be generalized across cultures, ethnicities, tribes, and classes, considering that each language community or community of practice has their own norms of politeness.

The discussion on gender and politeness in this article is divided into six (6) sub-sections, namely *Introduction* (1); *Men, Women, and Gender* (2); *Politeness* (3); *Gender and Politeness* (4); *Gender and Javanese Politeness* (5); and *Conclusion* (6). In sub-section (2), we outline the conceptual differences between 'sex' or 'sex categories' and 'gender.' While the 'sex category' is built on biological differences, 'gender' is a socio-cultural construction. Sub-section (3) presents a description of the

concept of 'politeness,' 'face,' and 'types of positive and negative politeness.' In sub-sections (4) and (5), we discuss gender and politeness, as well as gender and politeness from a Javanese cultural perspective, while in sub-section (6) we present the essence of the entire discussion in this article.

2. Men, Women and Gender

The terms "men" and "women" refer to sex categories (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015), which are grouped based on biological differences. Therefore, these sex-based categories are often considered exclusive or binary oppositions (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). This means that a person can only belong to one of these groups: either male or female. They cannot be both male and female, or they cannot be somewhere in between. For example, they are neither completely male nor completely female.

However, in some cultures, the division of sex categories into only male and female does not apply (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Wardaugh and Fuller (2015) mention that in Native American culture, there is a cultural classification called "two-spirit people" (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 312) or people with two souls. Meanwhile, in India, there are cultural categories of *hijras* and *kotis*, namely people whose physical and/or behavior resembles that of men and women. *Hijras* and *kotis* have their own roles in Indian society (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 312). In Indonesia, especially in Java, people have long been familiar with the term '*waria*' or *wanita pria*, meaning 'feminine men,' to refer to men who act, behave, and dress imitating women. For years, *waria* tended to be viewed negatively, and they often experienced social discrimination, such as being unable to get jobs like men. Now, along with the development of gender activist thought and activities, the terms "transgender" and "transsexual" are being socialized in the public sphere to refer to people who are neither male nor female. This is why Wardaugh and Fuller (2015) state that classifying sex categories simply as "male" and "female" often does not align with the reality on the ground:

> Thus, while sex categories make references to biological characteristics, and are often perceived as binary and mutually exclusive, they are not entirely in synch with the reality of human diversity and some societies have more than two categories and may accept more fluid membership in sex categories (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, hal. 312).

Unlike sex, which is biological, 'gender'—frequently associated with sex—is a product or sociocultural construction (Holmes, 2001; Mills, 1998; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Therefore, the concepts of masculinity and femininity in one society are very likely to differ from the concepts of masculinity and femininity in another society, differ from one culture to another, and differ from one era to another. Furthermore, these concepts of masculinity and femininity do not 'work' like binary oppositions, but rather act like a scale or continuum (Holmes, 2001; Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Thus, a person can be perceived as having feminine traits, quite feminine, or less feminine, and a woman who is considered to be 'less feminine' (perhaps because of the way she dresses or speaks) is not automatically labeled 'masculine'. In patriarchal societies, nevertheless, masculinity or traits deemed to indicate masculinity are valued more than feminine traits. A boy, for example, is not allowed to cry, as crying is associated with being whiny, feminine, or womanly.

3. Politeness

Politeness, according to Brown (2015, p. 383), has different meanings for different people: "Politeness means different things to different people." Politeness, in general, means maintaining harmony and avoiding social conflict (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). This suggests that politeness concerns communicating, speaking, and behaving according to the social norms that apply in a society (Brown, 2015), and because each language-speaking group has different norms of politeness, the concept of politeness also has different boundaries between different language-speaking groups.

Linguistically, politeness refers to discourse strategies or linguistic devices (Holmes & Wilson, 2017, p. 304) used by a speaker to maintain the face of their interlocutor. The term "face" in this context refers to "the public self-image of a person" (Yule, 1996, p. 60). For example, in an official forum, we will considered to be impolite and threaten the faces of our siblings if we call them by their nickname. Conversely, in intimate family gatherings, calling them "doctor" or "doc" is not a form of polite language (except in the context of joking or teasing them).

In line with the concept of 'face', politeness is then classified into (1) positive politeness, which is in line with the concept of positive face, and (2) negative politeness, which is related to the concept of negative face. Positive politeness, like positive face, emphasizes the close relationship between the parties involved in a speech event. This type of politeness is characterized, among other things, by the use of nicknames or familiar names when addressing each other. In countries like America, England, Australia, or New Zealand, positive politeness is characterized by the use of first names when referring to each other, for example, Robbie, Bob, Will, or Joan. In positive politeness, people communicate using informal and direct language. For example, in positive politeness, an Indonesian can borrow a book by directly saying or using an imperative, such as *Mytha, pinjam bukunya dong* 'Mytha, lend me your book, please. She does not need to use specific linguistic devices, such as the question words *bisa* 'can I' or *boleh* 'may I', to soften her request. In addition, positive politeness can also be characterized by the use of terms of endearment, slang, and swear words. However, this does not mean that all swear words demonstrate positive politeness. It really depends on the context in which it is used, because swear words, besides being used to show familiarity, can also be used as a face-threatening action.

Conversely, in negative politeness, negative face is emphasized. Therefore, in negative politeness, people will use formal language and greetings. In negative politeness, people will use polite and indirect language, because in positive politeness, people do not force or pressure others to comply with or fulfill their needs. The following are examples of requests that use negative politeness strategies:

a. Could you lend me a pen?
b. I'm sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a pen or something?
c. I know you're busy, but might I ask you if-em-if you happen to have a pen that I could, you know-eh-maybe borrow? (Yule, 1996, hal. 64-65)

4. Gender and Politeness

Is it true that women speak more politely than men? The answer to this question, according to Lakoff (2005), is "yes, women are more polite than men". This happens, Lakoff explains, because women have been educated to speak politely, or, to borrow Lakoff's term, to talk like a lady, since childhood. From this very childhood, women must be willing to speak politely if they want to avoid social sanctions, such as being ostracized, reprimanded, scolded, or ridiculed. In contrast, boys are not burdened with similar obligations. They are free to speak without having to follow certain rules of politeness, including the freedom to speak using harsh or rude words. This habit has an impact, among other things, on the subordination of women to men because, from childhood, women are never given the freedom to speak or express their opinions. They must follow the prevailing rules in society: talking like a lady. They are not given the opportunity to think, speak, and act as they wish. It is not surprising that as adults, women do not think, speak, and act as assertively as men (Lakoff, 2005).

Unfortunately, Lakoff (2005) lacked any data or evidence to support her opinion. Her view that women speak more politely than men was based on her personal observations or experiences, as well as the observations several people that were shared with her. This is the reason Lakoff's claim has been widely criticized by subsequent researchers (Holmes, 2001; Holmes & Wilson, 2017; Mills, 2003a,

2003b, 2004; Smith-Hefner, 1988). Linguists who study issues of politeness and gender argue that Lakoff made an error by generalizing her observations as if they applied to *all* groups of women, when in fact she only examined the politeness phenomena of middle-class white women. She did not investigate the politeness of women from other social classes, races, groups, or cultures. For example, Lakoff did not study the behavior of African American women or Asian women.

Regarding Lakoff's stereotype mentioned above, Mills (2003b, p. 142) states that:

> As I mentioned earlier, one of the problems with early feminist research was that it often focused exclusively on the language usage of white, middle-class women and then made generalizations about all women. Many studies have since shown that groups of women behave in different ways depending on variables of context, class, race, education and so on. In some ways it could be argued that gender itself in isolation does not exist, but only gender as it is raced and classed (McClintock 1995).

Mills' critique (2003b) challenges Lakoff's (2005) view that women's language differs from men's language, including in terms of linguistic politeness, and that such differences arise from women's feelings of inferiority or lack of confidence. According to Mills, there are some factors that influence women's linguistic behavior, including social class, race, ethnicity, education, and family background. Similar statements are also made by Holmes (2001) and Wardhaugh (1992), who argue that differences between women's and men's language are shaped by a variety of factors, and that these differences and the influencing factors cannot be generalized across cultures.

In other words, we cannot simply assert that women are more polite in verbal communication than men. Such a statement should be examined in depth by directly researching the language-speaking groups being studied. Research conducted by Keenan (in Smith-Hefner, 1988) found that Malagasy women speak more rudely than men. This is because Malagasy women speak directly and informally, while the prevailing norms of politeness in Malagasy culture are indirect and formal:

> In Malagasy society, women have a reputation for directness and openness of expression. They are the ones who confront others with unpleasant information, who do the bargaining, and reprimand children - in direct opposition to the society's nonconfrontational conversational norms (Smith-Hefner, 1988, hal. 536).

Malagasy men are experts in *kabary*, a term that refers both to Malagasy traditional ceremonies and to the elevated language used in the performance of those ceremonies (Smith-Hefner, 1988). This is why Malagasy men speak in a refined manner, aligned with the norms of politeness upheld in that culture, since they are the ones responsible for conducting or leading Malagasy traditional events. In contrast, Malagasy women, who are responsible for managing everyday routine activities, speak in a rough manner. However, in Malagasy tradition—unlike in the tradition of lower middle-class white men (Mills, 2004)—speaking politely actually signifies a higher status, one that is superior to that of women (Smith-Hefner, 1988).

Martin's research on norms of politeness in Japan demonstrates that gender, age, and social class are factors influencing linguistic politeness (in Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Among the three factors, social class plays the most central role. Gender requires that Japanese women use more polite language when communicating with men. Age suggests that younger people must use polite language when speaking with older individuals. The last factor—social class—suggests that people from a lower social class must communicate politely with those of higher social status. Of these three factors, social class, as mentioned earlier, is the decisive factor in determining linguistic politeness in Japan. This means that an older man from a lower social class must use more polite language when addressing a younger woman from a higher social class.

What about the principles of linguistic politeness in Indonesia? Does gender become one of the factors that determine politeness in language? Do Indonesian women speak more politely than men? Answering these questions in the context of gender and politeness in Indonesia is neither easy nor simple, since Indonesia consists of various ethnic groups with highly diverse cultures. Therefore, in this paper, we limit the discussion of gender and politeness to Javanese culture. Even so, we must be very cautious, bearing in mind that Javanese culture and the Javanese people themselves are highly diverse, especially in today's increasingly open atmosphere. The norms of politeness and gender differences that apply in one Javanese community may not necessarily apply in another (Magnis-Suseno, 1984; Norwanto, 2016; Smith-Hefner, 1988).

5. Gender and Javanese Politeness

To understand gender and politeness in Javanese society, Nancy Smith-Hefner (1988) conducted ethnographic research on a group of Javanese speakers in East Java. The research was carried out twice on different groups of speakers. The first study was conducted by Smith-Hefner between 1978–1980 in a rural area in the highlands of East Java, while the second study focused on children in both rural and urban settings. The findings show that women must be more polite than men in any linguistic situation, especially within the family: "Javanese women are required to be more polite than men in most linguistic situations, especially within the family" (Smith-Hefner, 1988, p. 537). This is because, within the family, women (wives) are considered to have a lower status than men (husbands), and to demonstrate their respect (deference) toward their husbands, women must use Javanese that is more refined or polite than the language used by their husbands toward them. Women are expected to speak Javanese *krama* or, at the very least, *ngoko alus* to their husbands, while husbands respond using *ngoko*.

Women's politeness, in addition to being shown through the use of Javanese speech levels that are more refined or higher than those used by their husbands, is also demonstrated through the use of addressing terms within the family (Smith-Hefner, 1988). A wife must address her husband with terms that indicate respect, such as *mas*, *pak*, or *abi* (Norwanto, 2016; Smith-Hefner, 1988). Conversely, the husband is not entitled to and may address his wife without any respectful terms. In this context, age does not influence the politeness of language between husband and wife. Even if she is older, a woman must use language—including addressing terms—that shows respect toward her husband. On the other hand, the husband will call his wife by name, without honorifics such as *mbak* or *mbakyu*, even if the wife is older:

> Regardless of their actual ages, a Javanese husband commonly calls his wife by her first name, by a nickname, or by the kin term *dhik* 'younger sibling', whereas the husband is addressed as 'elder brother' (*mas*) by his wife (Smith-Hefner, 1988, hal. 541).

In addition to speech levels and addressing terms, Javanese politeness must also be demonstrated through the appropriate choice of tone (Poedjosoedarmo in Norwanto, 2016). Speaking quickly, loudly, harshly, and with drastically shifting intonation reflects impoliteness, which is usually done by speakers when communicating in highly familiar or intimate situations (Poedjosoedarmo in Norwanto, 2016). This should not be done by a Javanese speaker in formal settings or when speaking to someone older and/or of higher social status. In other words, a loud, fast, and harsh tone represents positive politeness, while a soft and gentle tone characterizes negative politeness. Both negative politeness strategies and positive politeness strategies are employed by Javanese women and men in public spaces, depending on the surrounding context (Smith-Hefner, 1988).

A similar result is presented by Febriadina, Sumarwati, and Sumarlam (2018), who discover that vocational high school students or SMK in Sragen displayed differing levels of politeness. Female

students, according to Febriadina et al. (2018, p. 80), speak more politely and are more cooperative than male students:

> In its application, there are two forms of students' use of linguistic politeness. Some students' utterances reflect politeness in language, while others speak carelessly without considering whether their speech is polite or not. The findings of this study show that female students tend to speak politely when communicating with teachers as well as with peers. In contrast to female students, male students are more free in their speech, especially with peers. Male students often use words that violate the basic principles of politeness. This can be seen from the greater number of violations of the maxims of politeness committed by male students compared to female students.

To summarize, the studies conducted by Nancy Smith-Hefner (1988), Norwanto (2016), and Febriadina et al. (2018) demonstrate that Javanese women speak more politely than men. Within the family domain, women (wives) must speak more politely than men (husbands) because women are regarded as having a lower status than their husbands. Men (husbands) are considered to be the heads of the family, and therefore women (wives) must show respect to their husbands by using more refined language as well as addressing terms that indicate respect for the husband's position.

In contrast, Magnis-Suseno (1984)—drawing on his observations of Javanese people, which align with Robert Jay's ethnographic study (1969) in "Modjokuto"—writes that Javanese women do not always speak more politely than their husband. Some Javanese women can speak more freely and loudly than their husbands; they can even shout, expressing their anger at the husbands, who choose to remain silent because, as the heads of the family, men are expected to set good examples.

An exploration of gender and politeness in Indonesian literature written by Javanese novelists reveals additional insights. In her novels *Pada Sebuah Kapal* (2019a)*, La Barka* (Dini, 2010)*,* and *Tirai Menurun* (2019b)*,* Nh. Dini writes that good (Javanese) women are soft-spoken and gracious, with a refined and courteous manner. Her protagonists Sri (*Pada Sebuah Kapal*), Rina (*La Barka*), and Sumirat (*Tirai Menurun*) are quiet, gentle and polite women. Sumirat, for instance, is portrayed as follows:

> *Sumirat menurut dan patuh. Dia memang alim. Kebanyakan kali tidak membantah orangtua, sehingga menjadi teladan serta panutan adiknya. Selama menetap di kota , Simbok hanya sekali mengalami satu kali kekerasan hati Sumirat, ialah ketika anak itu ingin belajar menari* (Dini, 2019b, p. 209).

> Sumirat is obedient and compliant. She is indeed pious. Most of the time she does not oppose her parents, thus becoming a model and example for her younger siblings. During their stay in the city, Mother experienced only once Sumirat's defiance, namely when the girl wished to learn dancing.

Ratna Kumala presents a provocative narrative in her novel *Tabula Rasa* (2016). Her protagonist, Raras, is pressured by her family to marry, as a woman's nature (*kodrat*) is culturally understood to be marriage and service to her husband (Kumala, 2016, pp. 111-112). She rejects this arrangement because she is a lesbian, a sexual orientation widely stigmatized in society. Unable to withstand the pressures of marriage and rigid gender roles, Raras decides to leave Indonesia and begins a new life in Canada, where she does not need to hide her true identity. Although the novel does not explicitly depict the practices of gendered politeness in Javanese society, it exposes Javanese patriarchy, in which women occupy inferior position within marriage. This inequality reinforces expectations that women show deference their husbands, including through polite speech.

Asymmetrical relations between Javanese husbands and wives are also depicted in novels by male Javanese authors. Works such as Toer's *Gadis Pantai* (2003), Atmowiloto's *Canting* (2013), Suryadi's *Pengakuan Pariyem* (2016), and Mangunwijaya's *Rara Mendut* (2019) portray women as subordinate to men within marriage, where they are expected to respect their husbands, including through more polite forms of speech.

6. Conclusion

The assertion that "women are more polite than men" and "men are rougher than women" represents an oversimplification. Empirical evidence suggests that not all groups of women consistently speak more politely than men, nor do all groups of men invariably speak less politely than women. Collectively, the studies reviewed here demonstrate that gender alone cannot account for individual choices of politeness in speech. Rather, politeness emerges from the interplay of multiple social variables—including age, social class, race, ethnicity, and educational background—underscoring the need to approach politeness as a socially situated practice rather than a biologically determined trait.

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