Gender, Language, and Influence

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Mixed- and same-sex dyads were observed to examine effects of gender composition on language and of language on gender differences in influence. Ss discussed a topic on which they disagreed. Women were more tentative than men, but only in mixed-sex dyads. Women who spoke tentatively were more influential with men and less influential with women. Language had no effect on how influential men were. In a second study, 120 Ss listened to an audiotape of identical persuasive messages presented either by a man or a woman, half of whom spoke tentatively. Female speakers who spoke tentatively were more influential with male Ss and less influential with female Ss than those who spoke assertively. Male speakers were equally influential in each condition.

Researchers have reported a wide variety of language differences between the sexes (e.g., Dabbs & Ruback, 1984; Haas, 1979; Kimble, Yoshikawa, & Zehr, 1981; Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986; Steckler & Rosenthal, 1985), as well as gender differences in influenceability (Eagly & Carli, 1981). This article focuses on a number of the language differences that have been linked to gender differences in status and power. In particular, it examines the effect of sex composition of dyads on gender differences in language and, in turn, examines how these differences affect social influence.

Gender and Status

According to expectation states theory, inequalities in face-to-face interactions are a function of the relative status of participants (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). In this model, status is culture specific and situation dependent. That is, individuals may possess characteristics that reflect relatively low status in one culture or situation but reflect high status or convey no status information in another culture or situation. In American culture, race, class, education, age, occupation, physical attractiveness, and gender can act as diffuse status characteristics, characteristics of a person that are used, particularly in the absence of specific information, to assess his or her competence, ability, or value (Berger & Fisek, 1974; Berger, Rosenholtz, & Zelditch, 1980; Eagly, 1983). People with relatively high status are expected to be more competent, to perform better, and to have more desirable attributes than low status individuals; they are also given more opportunities to perform well and are, consequently, more influential (Berger et al., 1977, 1980). In addition, in interactions among people who differ in relative status, it is considered illegitimate for the individual possessing lower status to behave too assertively, as such behavior could be construed as an attempt to gain status at the expense of other members of the group (Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). Therefore, low status individuals who behave assertively risk the rejection of others (Berger et al., 1980; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977).

Women generally have lower status than men, as is evidenced by the findings that stereotypical feminine traits are evaluated less favorably than stereotypical masculine traits (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972) and that women are considered to be less competent than men (Lockheed & Hall, 1976; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). In interactions between men and women, in the absence of specific information about group members' ability or competence, women would possess relatively lower status than men. However, in same-sex interactions, gender would not act as a diffuse status characteristic because it would convey no information about the relative ability, competence, or value of different members of the group. This suggests that in mixed-sex but not same-sex groups, women would be given fewer opportunities to make task contributions, would receive less support for their contributions, and would be less influential than men.

Language, Status, and Gender

Lakoff (1975) proposed that assertive speech is one domain of power denied to women, but available to men. That is, because women are relatively powerless and marginal compared...
with men, they presumably are not given the opportunity to express themselves as forcefully and directly as men are. Lakoff (1975) argued that women's less powerful speech would be manifested in their tendency to swear less, speak more politely, and use more tag questions, intensifiers, and hedges. Tag questions refer to declarative statements that are followed by a question concerning the statement (Lakoff, 1975), for example, "Teenagers have more car accidents than older people, don't they?" Statements are presumably less confident and assertive when tag questions are added to them (Lakoff, 1975).

Intensifiers are adverbs, such as the word so in the sentence, "Drinking and driving is so dangerous," that are used to provide emphasis but are considered by some researchers (Key, 1972; Lakoff, 1975) to be less powerful than more absolute superlatives. Hedges are adverbs or adverb phrases, such as sort of, perhaps, and maybe, that weaken the strength of a statement (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Lakoff, 1975).

Other researchers have also proposed links between status and language, arguing that the lower status of women causes them to interrupt others less than men do (Thorne & Henley, 1975); to qualify and weaken their statements with disclaimers such as I may be wrong but, I mean, and I don't know but (Pearson, 1985); and to verbally reinforce the speech of others more than men do by interjecting yeah, mm-hmm, and right while others are speaking (Thorne & Henley, 1975).

Studies testing these hypotheses have yielded mixed results, but overall provide support that gender differences in language do exist. Although there is no documented evidence that men swear more than women, and one study found no gender difference in the reported use of expletives (Staley, 1978), women are more polite (Hartman, 1976), less likely to interrupt (Argyle, Lalljee, & Cook, 1968; Eakins & Eakins, 1976; McCarrick, Maderscheid, & Siibelergeld, 1981; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Natale, Entin, & Jaffe, 1979; Octigan & Niederman, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1983; Willis & Williams, 1976; Zimmerman & West, 1975), and less successful at gaining the floor after interrupting (Zimmerman & West, 1975) than are men. In addition, some evidence indicates that women are also more likely than men to hedge (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977, Studies 1 and 3; Fishman, 1978, 1980; Mulac & Lundell, 1986; Mulac et al., 1986), ask tag questions (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977, Studies 1 and 3; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977; Zimmerman & West, 1975), verbally reinforce others (Fishman, 1978; Hirschman, 1974), and use disclaimers (Hartman, 1976; Hirschman, 1973) and intensifiers (Key, 1972; Mulac & Lundell, 1986; Mulac et al., 1986, 1988). Other researchers have found no gender differences in language (Bau-man, 1976; Beattie, 1981; Crosby, Jose, & Wong-McCarthy, 1981; Crosby & Nyquist, 1977, Study 2; Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Moore, Shaffer, Goodsell, & Baringoldz, 1983; Roger & Nes-hoever, 1987).

There are several possible explanations for the inconsistency in findings. First, it is possible that the gender differences are real, but small, because small differences can be expected to sometimes lead to null results (Eagly, 1983).1

Another possibility is that gender differences occur primarily when men and women are together and are less likely to occur in same-sex interactions. In mixed-sex interactions, gender can act as a diffuse status characteristic. Consequently, dominant or assertive behavior among women would be least appropriate when they are interacting with men (Berger et al., 1980; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). It is likely that subjects in past research on language have used gender to infer status, because in much of this research subjects have been strangers who had little specific information about one another. Diffuse status characteristics are more likely to be used under such conditions.

If gender differences in language are related to status differences between the sexes, then status characteristics other than gender should also affect language. In fact, people, regardless of gender, may use tentative language when interacting with someone possessing higher status or power, but not when among equals. There is evidence that this is the case. For example, among romantic couples (Courtright, Millar, & Rogers-Miller, 1979; Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985), parents and children (West & Zimmerman, 1977), and strangers (O'Barr, 1982; Roger & Nesshoever, 1987; Rogers & Jones, 1975), the more powerful or dominant person of either sex is more likely to interrupt and to be more successful at it, whereas the less powerful person tends to use more tag questions (Kollock et al., 1985). In addition, high status or high dominance men and women display a greater amount of verbal and nonverbal power, as measured by the amount that subjects look at their partners while speaking and look away while listening (Dovidio, Ellyson, Keating, Heltman, & Brown, 1988), and in mixed-sex discussions of gender neutral topics, men display a greater amount of verbal and nonverbal power, except when the topic discussed was sex typed; in that condition the gender that possessed greater knowledge of it exhibited more verbal and nonverbal dominance (Dovidio, Brown, Heltman, Ellyson, & Keating, 1988).

A third possible explanation for the inconsistency in findings is that not all of the reported gender differences in language may reflect the greater tentativeness of women. In fact, two of the gender differences, the use of intensifiers and verbal reinforcers, appear to be less a reflection of women's greater tentativeness than of their greater emotional expressiveness and sociability.2 Verbal reinforcers serve to encourage others to con-

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1 In some instances, unpredicted or nonsignificant gender differences in language may be a function of the amount that subjects spoke. For example, Bilous and Krauss (1988) reported a greater number of interruptions among pairs of women than among mixed-sex pairs or pairs of men. However, they also reported that female pairs talked more than any other type of dyad. Clearly, the absolute number of interruptions (as well as tag questions, disclaimers, hedges, and other types of speech) should increase as the amount of speaking increases. Unfortunately, a number of researchers reporting unpredicted or nonsignificant results failed to report a test for the amount of speech (see Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Lapadat & Seesahai, 1978).

2 Some researchers have suggested that tag questions can reflect a social-emotional orientation rather than tentativeness, because, for example, tag questions can be used to encourage others to speak (Fishman, 1980; Johnson, 1980). Tag questions used in this way function much more as questions than as statements and are sometimes coded as a type of question (Johnson, 1980). If questions do serve a social-emotional function, then gender differences in asking questions should be reported in studies of interaction processes, particularly among subjects interacting in same-sex groups. However, gender dif-
tinue speaking. As such, their function may be similar to that of positive social behaviors and agreements in task-oriented groups—creating a more social or group-oriented interaction (Meeker & Weitzel-O’Neill, 1977). Although intensifiers, such as vastly so, and awfully, have been considered tentative, they are probably used by speakers to provide emphasis rather than to express uncertainty (McMillan et al., 1977). It is possible, then, that gender differences in the use of intensifiers and verbal reinforcers may not be due to the status difference between men and women, but rather to a gender difference in the orientation that men and women have toward others.

A number of researchers have noted that, in general, women tend to exhibit a social–emotional or relational orientation in interactions with others, whereas men tend to exhibit a more independent and unemotional orientation (Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1977; Eagly, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). This difference is often attributed to stable personality characteristics acquired through the different socialization of men and women. However, if this gender difference is intrinsic to male and female personalities, women should consistently exhibit a greater social–emotional orientation toward both men and women across a wide variety of situations. However, research has revealed that this is not the case; this gender difference occurs primarily for same-sex interactions. That is, women tend to be particularly social and emotional in interactions with other women, and men the least so in interactions with other men. For example, the friendships of women emphasize intimacy and emotional expressiveness, the friendships of men emphasize shared activity (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Barth & Kinder, 1988; Bell, 1981; Rubin, 1985), and cross-sex friendships tend to be less sex stereotyped than same-sex friendships (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987). Women exhibit more positive social–emotional behavior than men in same-sex groups; in mixed-sex groups, both men and women behave more like members of the opposite sex (Carli, 1989; Piliavin & Martin, 1978). In a study examining vocal cues in the conversations of same- and mixed-sex dyads, interactions were rated as most pleasant and least businesslike among women, least pleasant and most businesslike among men, and between these two extremes in mixed-sex interactions (Hall & Braunwald, 1981). This same pattern of findings has been also revealed in reviews of research on nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling and touching (Hall, 1984), and cooperativeness (Carli, 1982). It appears, then, that different norms do operate in same-sex interactions than in mixed-sex interactions, and that these norms lead to a pattern of behavior that is most social in groups of women and least social in groups of men.

A reasonable conclusion based on the literature is that the gender difference in social–emotional orientation is a function of expectancies and behavior norms that depend, in part, on the gender composition of the group in which subjects interact, and not on gender differences in personality. The sex composition of groups may affect the salience of gender as a social category; this, in turn, may trigger gender-linked schemas leading to different gender-related expectancies and behaviors (Deaux & Major, 1987). It is likely that different schemas and expectancies are associated with same-sex interactions than with mixed-sex interactions. Because gender belief systems (Deaux & Kite, 1987), which are the set of beliefs that people hold about the characteristics and behaviors of men and women, typically include the stereotype that women are more social and expressive than men (Broverman et al., 1972; Williams & Best, 1982), subjects may expect a high amount of social–emotional behavior in interactions among women and very little in interactions among men; these expectancies may be self-fulfilling. Subjects may also enter mixed-sex interactions expecting sex-typed behavior from those of the opposite sex. Because norms governing their behavior may be less clear than in same-sex interactions, individuals may, as a result, exhibit behavior that is more similar to that which they expect from the opposite sex.

Gender-related expectancies may be clearer for same-sex groups because sex segregation is common in American culture. From preschool on, children interact primarily in same-sex groups (Lockheed & Klein, 1985; Maccoby, 1988; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). Although this pattern weakens somewhat during adolescence and adulthood, sex segregation during these development stages is characteristic of friendships (Verbrugge, 1977), occupations (Reskin, 1984; Reskin & Hartmann, 1986; Roos, 1985), and activities (Berk, 1985; Hartmann, 1981).

If the use of intensifiers and verbal reinforcers does reflect a social–emotional orientation to a group interaction, then gender differences in their use should occur in same-sex interactions, but to a lesser extent, if at all, in mixed-sex interactions. On the other hand, if the gender difference in the use of tentative versus assertive language is a function of the status difference between the sexes, then gender differences in the use of interruptions, tag questions, hedges, and disclaimers should occur in mixed-sex interactions but not in same-sex interactions.

Few of the previous studies that have obtained gender differences have included comparisons of the gender differences in mixed-sex interactions with those in same-sex interactions. However, those that have, have reported that the gender difference in interruptions (McMillan et al., 1977; Octigian & Nieder- man, 1979; Zimmermann & West, 1975) was larger in mixed-sex interactions and the gender difference in the use of verbal reinforcers (Hirschman, 1974) was marginally larger in same-sex interactions, providing some support for the argument developed above.

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3 One study (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977) found no effect of sex composition on language. However, in this study researchers combined polite- ness, tag questions, and hedges to create an index of tentative language rather than testing each behavior separately. A second (Mulac, Wie- mann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988), found larger gender differences...
Hypothesis 1. Gender differences in the use of tag questions, hedges, and disclaimers, with a higher amount of each behavior exhibited by women, will be larger in mixed-sex than same-sex groups.

Hypothesis 2. Gender differences in interruptions, with a higher amount of interruptions and successful interruptions exhibited by men, will be larger in mixed-sex than same-sex groups.

Hypothesis 3. Gender differences in the use of intensifiers and verbal reinforcers, with a higher amount of each behavior exhibited by women, will be larger in same-sex than mixed-sex groups.

Gender, Language, and Influence

According to Lakoff (1975), the use of uncertain or tentative language limits women's ability to express themselves and puts them at a disadvantage when interacting with others. In fact, individuals who speak tentatively are evaluated less favorably than those who speak assertively (Wiley & Eskilson, 1985) and are considered less credible and attractive (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978). Moreover, women who speak tentatively are considered less intelligent and knowledgeable than men who speak tentatively (Bradley, 1981), so the use of tentative speech would appear to interfere with a woman's ability to influence others more than a man's.

However, it is possible that tentative language may also be functional for women, particularly when they are interacting with men. In interactions with men, women are not only expected to be less competent, but they are also expected to show relatively little competitiveness or dominance (Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). Exhibiting competitive or dominant behavior can be construed as an attempt to gain status or influence, and such attempts are considered inappropriate in people who are low in external status, regardless of their level of competence (Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). Such people must demonstrate an altruistic desire to help the group before their contributions will be accepted by high status members; moreover, for low status individuals, displaying behavior that is group oriented and not self-enhancing may be even more important than appearing competent (Hollander & Julian, 1970; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). Because women may find it difficult to influence men if they behave too assertively (Lockheed & Hall, 1976; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977), they may instead have to rely on more subtle and less direct strategies to induce influence (Johnson, 1976). One subtle approach to influence may be the use of uncertain or tentative language.

Women, and people who possess little power, do report using more indirect influence strategies than men and more powerful individuals (Cowan, Drinkard, & MacGavin, 1984; Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Gruber & White, 1986; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986; Offermann & Kearney, 1988; Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues, 1975). For example, women report that they rely on being likable or pleasant (Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Offermann & Kearney, 1988; Raven et al., 1975) and cry or hint to get their way (Falbo & Peplau, 1980; Howard et al., 1986). Although there is no evidence that an indirect strategy is more effective for women than being direct, women interacting with men would probably be more influential by speaking tentatively, even though they would probably be perceived as less competent.

However, there may be little benefit for women to speak tentatively to other women. In same-sex interactions, gender does not act as a diffuse status characteristic (Berger & Fiske, 1974), so there would be no need for a woman to behave differently under such conditions. Moreover, women are generally assumed to be less competent than men (Lockheed & Hall, 1976; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977), and their use of tentative language further reduces their perceived competence (Bradley, 1981). Consequently, a woman using tentative speech with another woman may not be seen as competent enough to be persuasive and may actually be less influential than a woman speaking assertively.

Hypothesis 4. Women will be more influential with men when speaking tentatively than when speaking assertively, and more influential with women when speaking assertively.

Study 1

Method

Pretest. A pretest questionnaire was administered to 229 undergraduates in introductory psychology classes at a state university. They were contacted at the beginning of the semester and asked to complete a questionnaire on which they would indicate their opinion on a variety of topics. Subjects were informed that completing the questionnaire would provide them with an opportunity to participate in a study later in the semester. The questionnaire included 27 topics, 2 of which have been found to be sex neutral in previous research (Carli, 1989): "The drinking age should be lowered to 18 in this state (Massachusetts)" and "The federal government should provide free day care for working parents." Subjects indicated their agreement with each item on a scale ranging from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (10), their interest in each item on a scale ranging from no interest (1) to extremely high interest (10), and their knowledge of each item on a scale ranging from no knowledge (1) to extremely high knowledge (10).

The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify sex-neutral topics, those for which there are no sex differences in interest, knowledge, or opinion. The use of sex-biased topics could lead to artificial gender differences; the use of topics that favor one sex results in greater verbal assertiveness and power by members of that sex (Dovidio et al., 1988; Kelly, Wildman, & Urey, 1982) and greater influenceability among those of the opposite sex (Sistrunk & McDavid, 1971). The drinking age and day-care topics were again found to be sex neutral and, in addition, opinions on these topics were found to be quite variable, ensuring that subjects could be paired with partners with whom they disagreed.

Subjects. Respondents expressing relatively neutral opinions, reporting scores of 5 or 6 on the opinion scale, were eliminated from the sample of 229. The subjects, 59 men and 59 women, were selected at random from the remaining pretest subjects.

Procedure. Subjects were recruited by telephone about 6 weeks after completing the pretest and asked to schedule an appointment to participate in the study. They were scheduled in pairs, half with same-sex partners and half with opposite-sex partners, resulting in 58 subjects in mixed-sex pairs, 20 in male pairs, and 20 in female pairs. Pairings were made randomly, with the exception that partners always

in same-sex groups, but, again, combined all behaviors to create an overall measure of gender differences in language.
were paired so that they disagreed with one another on both topics. The amount of disagreement varied randomly among the pairs.

Because subjects had been assigned partners at random, the difference in opinion between partners was not expected to vary across the three types of sex composition (mixed-sex, male, or female). One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the difference scores revealed no effect of sex composition for either topic, $F < 1$. Levene's (1960) test to detect heterogeneity of variance revealed no difference between the groups, $F < 1$.

Before the experiment began, partners were informed that they would be discussing a controversial topic with one another and that they would be videotaped during the discussion. Subjects were then given an opportunity to withdraw. None did.

A random selection of approximately half of the pairs was then presented with the drinking age topic and half with the day-care topic, and these subjects were asked to discuss the topic for 10 min. The experimenter then left and videotaped the discussion from an adjacent room through a one-way mirror. After the discussion, subjects were separated from their partners and asked to indicate their opinion on the topic they had just discussed on a scale ranging from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (10). Subjects were then fully debriefed and excused.

Results

The topic of the discussion had no effect on any of the results and was eliminated from the analyses. Because gender was both a within-group variable for the mixed-sex dyads and a between-group variable for the same-sex dyads, separate ANOVAs were required for these two types of dyads. For the mixed-sex dyads, a $2 \times 29$ (Gender $\times$ Dyad) repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted because each dyad contained both a male and a female subject. For the same-sex dyads, a $2 \times 15$ (Gender $\times$ Dyad) ANOVA was conducted, with dyads nested within gender because some dyads were exclusively male and some exclusively female. I followed a procedure that has been used previously (Carl, 1989) to combine the two data analyses; this involved computing a linear combination of the means as well as a linear combination of the between- and within-groups error terms. The analysis yielded $t$ tests of the following effects: main effect of gender, main effect of sex composition, and the interaction of gender and composition. For example, to test the hypothesis that the size of the gender difference is larger in mixed- than in same-sex dyads, the interaction term, I performed the following contrast:

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(M_{fm} - M_{mm} - M_{fn} + M_{mn})/(M_{pool} \times (1/n))^{1/2},
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in which $M_{fm}$ is the mean for women in mixed-sex groups, $M_{mm}$ is the mean for men in mixed-sex groups, $M_{fn}$ is the mean for women in same-sex groups, and $M_{mn}$ is the mean for men in same-sex groups. $M_{pool}$ is the pooled error term, which combines the error term for gender from the repeated-measures analysis with that from the between-groups analysis; $n$ is the number of observations on which each mean was based.

Coding of videotapes. A male and a female rater, unaware of the hypotheses or purpose of the study, analyzed all of the videotapes and recorded for each subject the frequency of the following behaviors: disclaimers, hedges, tag questions, interruptions, successful interruptions, intensifiers, and verbal reinforcers. A record was also made of the number of arguments presented by each subject and the total number of words spoken by each subject. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to test the reliability of the raters. Because subjects' responses could not be considered independent of their partners, the 59 pairs of subjects were randomly divided into two groups of 59 subjects and the analyses were performed separately for the two groups. The average of the correlation coefficients for the two groups, computed separately for each type of behavior and for the total number of words, ranged from $r(57) = .82, p < .001$, to $r(57) = .96, p < .001$. The judgments of the two raters were highly reliable.

Effect of gender and sex composition on language. A total measure of subjects' use of tentative language was computed by summing each subject's number of qualifiers, hedges, and tag questions. Analyses were conducted on each of the three behaviors separately, as well as on the total measure and the number of words spoken by each subject. There were no main effects or interactions for the number of words spoken by each subject, $F < 1$; there were no differences in the amount that men and women spoke in either the mixed- or same-sex dyads. A main effect of sex composition was found for the number of hedges, $t(56) = 2.38, p < .05$. There were more hedges in mixed-sex than in same-sex dyads ($M = 15.64$ vs. 12.15, respectively). A main

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4 Fifteen of the mixed-sex pairs, eight of the female pairs, and eight of the male pairs were assigned the drinking-age topic.

5 The sources of variance and degrees of freedom for the mixed-sex dyads were as follows: dyads on 28 degrees of freedom, gender on 1 degree of freedom, and the interaction of gender with dyads on 28 degrees of freedom. The sources of variance and degrees of freedom for the same-sex dyads were as follows: gender on 1 degree of freedom, dyads nested within gender on 28 degrees of freedom, and subjects nested within dyads on 30 degrees of freedom.

6 A $2 \times 2$ (Sex of Subject) $\times$ (Sex of Partner) analysis of variance (ANOVA) would require arbitrarily assigning one member of each dyad to be the subject and the other to be the partner. The means for each gender would then be based on only one half of the actual subjects in each condition. For example, although there were a total of 30 men in the same-sex dyads, the mean would be based on the 15 men assigned to be subjects. The analysis used in this study allows all subjects to be included in the analysis.

7 Examples of each of the behaviors are given later. Disclaimers were recorded when they immediately preceded a statement or opinion and included "I'm no expert, I may be wrong, I'm not sure, I don't know, I suppose, I mean, and I guess. Adverbs or adverb phrases used in the middle of statements were coded as hedges when they conveyed either moderation or no particular meaning at all, as in "Drinking and driving is like dangerous," and included kind of, sort of, you know, maybe, or whatever, and like. Questions such as isn't it? aren't they? don't you think? wouldn't you say? you knew? and right? were coded as tag questions when they were added to the end of statements that were consistent with a subject's original attitude, for example, "It's unfair to prevent 18-year-olds from drinking when they can be drafted and killed in wars, isn't it?" Interruptions were recorded whenever a subject attempted to make a statement while his or her partner was speaking. They were coded as successful when the person doing the interrupting gained the floor immediately after interrupting. Adverbs used in the middle of statements were coded as intensifiers when they were used to convey emphasis or intensity, such as so, very, really, awfully, and truly. Adverbs indicating agreement were coded as verbal reinforcers when subjects used them while or immediately after their partner spoke, for example, right, yeah, yes, mm-hmm, sure, and uh-huh.
The results suggest that the lower status of women, compared with men, does affect women's speech. When interacting with men, women spoke more tentatively than when interacting with women. Moreover, the use of tentative speech appears to be functional for women. Men were influenced to a greater degree by women who spoke tentatively than by those who spoke assertively. It may be important for a woman not to behave too competitively or assertively when interacting with men in order for her to wield any influence, even if she may risk appearing incompetent.

Contrary to prediction, men did not interrupt more than women. Nor were men more successful than women at gaining the floor after interrupting. Previously, gender differences in interruptions have been reported for conversations between people who knew each other (Eakins & Eakins, 1976; Zimmerman & West, 1975) and informal 30-min conversations between strangers (Natale et al., 1979). Perhaps gender differences in interruptions did not emerge in the present study because

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It is possible that the relation between the use of tentative language and influence was due to a third variable, the number of arguments presented. Tentative women may have been more influential with men than women. Moreover, the use of tentative speech appears to be functional for women. Men were influenced to a greater degree by women who spoke tentatively than by those who spoke assertively. It may be important for a woman not to behave too competitively or assertively when interacting with men in order for her to wield any influence, even if she may risk appearing incompetent.
subjects did not know each other well enough or have enough time to get to know one another. It is possible that when interactions are more formal, as may have been the case in the present study, the overall amount of interrupting is reduced, creating a floor effect and obscuring any gender difference.

Finally, support was obtained for the third hypothesis. In same-sex dyads, women were more likely to use intensifiers and verbal reinforcers than men, whereas no gender differences emerged in mixed-sex dyads. Women's greater use of these two forms of speech may reflect their tendency to exhibit more social and emotional behavior when interacting with other women and the tendency of male dyads to emphasize task-oriented behavior (Carli, 1989). These results indicate that stereotypical gender differences in language may occur for reasons unrelated to status. Consequently, a careful examination of other such differences would be needed before concluding that a particular form of speech is less powerful simply because it is favored by women.

Although the results of this study demonstrate a relationship between the use of tentative language on the part of women and their ability to influence men, this relationship may or may not be causal. It is possible, for example, that the women who spoke most tentatively to their male partners were also more pleasant or friendly than the more assertive women; their ability to influence their partners may have been a function of their friendliness rather than their tentativeness. A second study was conducted to test whether the relationship between language and influence was, indeed, causal.

**Study 2**

In the first study, the use of tentative speech had no effect on how influential women were when interacting with other women. It is possible that in interactions between individuals of relatively equal status, women interacting with women or men interacting with men, language is irrelevant. On the other hand, it is more probable that some other characteristic of the interactions between the women in the present study eliminated the effect of tentative language. For example, influence may have been affected by subjects' interaction style, which has already been shown to affect influence, and which is, in turn, affected by the sex composition of groups (Carli, 1989). Finally, the lack of an effect may have been due to the small number of female pairs and the few degrees of freedom, resulting in too little power to detect the effect.

As stated earlier, women in general are considered to be less competent than men, and the use of tentative language is likely to further reduce perceived competence. In interactions with men, this may not be a disadvantage because a woman's tentativeness would then be consistent with her relative status. In interactions with other women, who are status equals, tentativeness may have no particular advantage, but would still probably reduce perceived competence. Consequently, the use of tentative language may reduce a woman's ability to influence another woman.

In the first study, the use of tentative language had no effect on how influential men were. Being male may make one a legitimate leader (Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977). As a result, men may be assumed to be competent and knowledgeable, regardless of their speech.

**Hypothesis 1.** Women will be more influential with men when speaking tentatively and more influential with women when speaking assertively.

**Hypothesis 2.** Men will be equally influential, whether they speak assertively or tentatively.

**Method**

**Pretest.** A sample of 34 male and 67 female introductory psychology students indicated their interest, knowledge, and opinion concerning each of 28 topics. Ratings were made on 11-point scales ranging from no interest (1) to extremely high interest (11), no knowledge (1) to extremely high knowledge (11), and completely disagree (1) to completely agree (11), respectively. The purpose of the pretest was to identify topics that revealed no sex differences and for which there was little variability in opinion. The topic selected to be used in the study was "The college bus system should charge a fare each time someone uses a bus." All students in the pretest felt strongly that the bus system should remain free.

**Subjects.** Sixty male and 60 female undergraduates were recruited from psychology classes. Subjects received extra credit for participating in the study.

**Procedure.** A persuasive message of approximately 500 words was written in support of charging a fare. Some of the arguments included in the message were as follows: More buses could be purchased with the money, which would allow buses to run more frequently; the money could be spent on additional training for drivers, which would increase bus safety; the money could be used to help maintain the buses and prevent breakdowns; students are already paying for the buses through student fees, but not all students who pay student fees actually use the buses; people who are not students can take the buses even though they pay no student fees; and additional routes could be added. This message without added tag questions, hedges, or disclaimers constituted the assertive version of the message. A second, tentative version was created by adding tag questions, hedges, and disclaimers. The language used in this version was constructed to be comparable to that used by highly tentative subjects in Study 1. The two versions were identical in every other respect.

Two male and two female confederates rehearsed both versions of the message until they were able to present them in a relaxed, informal manner. Separate audiotapes were made of the four speakers presenting each of the two versions of the message, resulting in a total of eight different speeches.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one version of the speech. They were told that the tape had been made of another student who had been asked whether a fare should be charged for the use of the college bus system. The experiment was conducted in a language laboratory, which made it possible for subjects to participate in groups and for different versions of the speech to be presented simultaneously over headphones.

After listening to one version of the speech, subjects rated their opinion on the topic on an 11-point scale ranging from complete disagreement (1) to complete agreement (11). They then rated the speaker on 11-point scales indicating whether he or she was not knowledgeable (1) or very knowledgeable (11), not interested (1) or very interested (11), high in confidence (1) or low in confidence (11), powerless (1) or powerful.

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9 Cramer's (1946) test of skewness revealed that the distribution of scores was highly skewed to the right, $sk = 5.87$. The majority of subjects interrupted approximately 6 or 7 times; a small number of them showed a higher amount of interruptions.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Gender of subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tentative language</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive language</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tentative language</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive language</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Higher scores reflect greater agreement with the persuasive message.

Results

There were no effects due to the individual speakers, so this variable was eliminated from the analysis. Levene's (1960) test to detect heterogeneity revealed no difference in variability for the male and female speaker conditions, $F < 1$. A 2 (Gender of Subject) x 2 (Gender of Speaker) x 2 (Type of Language) ANOVA was conducted on the dependent variables. For the opinion measure, a Gender of Subject x Type of Language interaction was obtained, $F(1, 112) = 10.34, p < .01$. Women were influenced more by assertive than tentative language ($M = 5.57$ vs. 3.60), $F(1, 112) = 8.04, p < .01$, and men were marginally more influenced by tentative than assertive language ($M = 4.57$ vs. 3.37), $F(1, 112) = 2.98, p < .10$. In addition, as predicted, a three-way interaction was obtained revealing larger language effects for female speakers, $t(12) = 1.71, p < .05$, one-tailed. Planned contrasts performed on the means, which are presented in Table 2, provided support for Hypothesis 1. Female speakers were more influential with men when they spoke tentatively than when they spoke assertively, $t(12) = 2.11, p < .05$, one-tailed, and more influential with women when they spoke assertively than when they spoke tentatively, $t(12) = 2.85, p < .01$, one-tailed. As predicted by Hypothesis 2, male speakers were equally influential, regardless of their language or the gender of the subject, $p > .25$.

Subjects' ratings of the speaker were coded so that high scores reflected a high amount of each characteristic. ANOVAS revealed main effects of type of language for how tentative, confident, powerful, competent, intelligent, and knowledgeable the speaker was perceived to be. As Table 3 shows, speakers who spoke tentatively were judged to be more tentative and less confident, powerful, competent, intelligent, and knowledgeable. A gender of speaker effect was also obtained for how knowledgeable the speaker was perceived to be, $F(1, 112) = 6.57, p < .05$. Male speakers were judged to be more knowledgeable than female speakers ($M = 8.75$ vs. 8.03, respectively). In addition, a Type of Language x Gender of Speaker interaction was obtained for ratings of the speaker's knowledge, $F(1, 112) = 4.36$, $p < .05$, and marginally for ratings of how competent the speaker was, $F(1, 112) = 3.10, p < .10$. Contrasts revealed no effect of language on the perceived competence or knowledge of male speakers, $p > .25$. However, women speaking assertively were judged to be more competent, $F(1, 112) = 13.97, p < .001$ ($M = 8.00$ vs. 6.20), and more knowledgeable, $F(1, 112) = 6.65, p < .05$ ($M = 8.77$ vs. 7.13), than those speaking tentatively. No other effects were found for these variables, and no effects were obtained for subjects' judgments of how interested the speaker was in the topic.

Gender of Subject x Type of Language interactions were obtained for subjects' ratings of how trustworthy, $F(1, 112) = 9.71, p < .01$, and likable, $F(1, 112) = 4.70, p < .05$, the speaker was. Female subjects considered the assertive speaker to be more trustworthy, $F(1, 112) = 4.97, p < .05$ ($M = 7.13$ vs. 6.10), and more likable, $F(1, 112) = 4.56, p < .05$ ($M = 7.33$ vs. 6.17), than the tentative speaker, whereas male subjects considered the assertive speaker to be less trustworthy, $F(1, 112) = 4.69, p < .05$ ($M = 6.57$ vs. 7.57), but not significantly less likable ($M = 6.47$ vs. 6.97), than the tentative speaker.

Three-way interactions were also obtained for how trustworthy, $F(1, 112) = 7.89, p < .01$, and likable, $F(1, 112) = 5.09, p < .05$, speakers were judged to be. These results paralleled those found for the opinion measure. Planned contrasts revealed that judgments of female speakers depended on both their language and the gender of the subjects, whereas judgments of male speakers did not. Female speakers were judged to be more trustworthy by men, $F(1, 112) = 10.04, p < .01$, and less trustworthy by women, $F(1, 112) = 7.59, p < .01$, when they were tentative than when they were assertive (see Table 4). They were also judged to be more likable by men, $F(1, 112) = 3.66, p < .05$, and less likable by women, $F(1, 112) = 6.31, p < .05$ (see Table 4).

General Discussion

The results indicate that the use of tentative speech enhances a woman's ability to influence a man but reduces her ability to influence a woman. Moreover, both male and female speakers judged a woman who spoke tentatively to be less competent and knowledgeable than a woman who spoke assertively, but did not

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Tentative</th>
<th>Assertive</th>
<th>$F(1, 112)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tentative</td>
<td>7.12</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>13.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>8.40</td>
<td>32.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>13.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td>7.88</td>
<td>12.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>7.36</td>
<td>14.04**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>8.83</td>
<td>6.57**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Higher scores reflect higher ratings of confidence, powerfulness, competence, intelligence, knowledge, and tentativeness. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. 
consider language when rating the competence and knowledge of male speakers.

Although it may be commonly assumed that speakers who are judged to be incompetent and lacking in knowledge are not likely to be very influential, a female speaker was actually more influential when speaking tentatively to a male audience, even though she was also considered less knowledgeable and competent than a woman speaking assertively. These results provide supporting evidence that gender differences in the use of tag questions, disclaimers, and hedges are probably a function of status differences between men and women.

The results of both studies indicate that status may be an important determinant of gender differences in language. However, status is clearly not the only determinant. It is likely that the gender differences in use of intensifiers and verbal reinforcers are due to different norms that have been established for male and female groups. In particular, such behavior may reflect subjects' expectation that interactions between women are often highly social.

In the first experiment, women spoke more tentatively when interacting with men than with women. The results of the second experiment indicate that such behavior may represent an attempt by women to deal with status inequities when in mixed-sex interactions. They also support the contention of Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill (1977) that low status persons must first demonstrate that they have no desire to compete for status before their ideas will be considered by higher status individuals. Tentative language may serve the function of communicating that the speaker has no desire to enhance his or her own status.

Although the results of these studies are consistent with the status explanation developed in the introduction, it is possible that women may use tentative language when interacting with men for more than one reason. Tentative language may be used as a subtle influence strategy, as I have already suggested. It may also be used by women because they may expect men to be too assertive and overconfident in their speech. That is, the presence of men may make women conscious of their speech style and concerned that they not behave in the same overconfident manner that they expect from men. Finally, women may speak more assertively to women than to men because they may feel that women are generally more careful and correct in their speech than men are and, consequently, it may be more important to speak correctly to women.

In this study, men perceived a tentative woman to be more trustworthy and likable than an assertive woman, whereas women judged her to be less likable and trustworthy. A woman who spoke tentatively may not have been perceived as particularly competent or knowledgeable, yet she was still more influential with a male audience, perhaps because they have found her behavior more acceptable than that of a more assertive woman and, consequently, may have been less resistant to her arguments. Moreover, if women generally do speak tentatively to men, as Study 1 suggests, then male subjects may have expected the female speaker to be tentative. They may have been less influenced by a woman who spoke assertively because her behavior violated their expectations.

Women were less influenced by a female speaker when she spoke tentatively than when she spoke assertively. This may be because women found tentative female speakers to be less believable, likable, and competent. In addition, if women are accustomed to hearing other women speak assertively, they may expect such behavior and may be less influenced when their expectations are violated. Unfortunately, for women, the use of tentative language as a subtle influence strategy either compromises their perceived competence or makes it difficult for them to be persuasive to an audience of both men and women.

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