

Strategic Use of Women's Language Features in Jennifer Parlamis' TED Talk

Dita Shafa Qutratu'ain⁽¹⁾, Nur Latifah⁽²⁾

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Indonesia
Email: ¹ditashafa01@gmail.com, ²ifalatifah2023@gmail.com

Abstract: Recent studies have shown that women's language features (WLF) increasingly function as rhetorical strategies in professional discourse rather than mere gender markers, yet research in globally mediated speaking contexts such as TED Talks remains limited. This study aims to examine the types of WLF used in Jennifer Parlamis' TED Talk entitled "Why Venting Doesn't Help You with Anger" and to analyze their pragmatic and rhetorical functions in professional public speaking. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, with data analyzed using Lakoff's (1975) framework, further interpreted through Holmes (1995) and Coates (2015). The findings reveal that emphatic stress emerged as the dominant feature, functioning to reinforce key messages and strengthen persuasive impact, while lexical hedges served to maintain an approachable conversational tone rather than signal uncertainty. Overall, WLF in this talk operates not as markers of gendered communication, but as intentional rhetorical strategies that enhance clarity, credibility, and emotional engagement with a global audience.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in online public speaking videos show that a feminine language style often correlates with higher view and stronger audience engagement, regardless of whether the speaker is male or female (Anderson, 2016). This phenomenon shows that linguistic features; hedges, tag questions, or intensifiers (commonly associated with women's language features) have now evolved into rhetorical resources capable of engaging a global audience (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1995; Coates, 2015). This popularity indicates that WLF are no longer merely seen as gender markers but rather as effective communication strategies for building credibility, empathy, and persuasive power in public discourse.

The use of women's language features (WLF) in TED Talks reveals variations in language usage that can be analyzed within the fields of linguistics, particularly sociolinguistics and pragmatics. TED Talks are a unique form of public communication as they combine careful preparation with live delivery in front of a global audience. This makes TED Talks an ideal context for examining how WLF functions beyond gender representation (Holmes, 1995; Coates, 2015). In relation to this study, the focus is directed at analyzing the language style of Jennifer Parlamis in her TED Talk entitled "*Why Venting Doesn't Help You with Anger*," where features such as hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, and politeness strategies are applied in an academic discourse that remains widely accessible. Therefore, this research falls within the scope of pragmatics and gender in public communication, examining how language is used strategically according to situational needs.

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representation (Holmes, 1995; Coates, 2015). In this research, the focus is analyzing the language style of Jennifer Parlamis in her TED Talk speech entitled "*Why Venting Doesn't Help You with Anger*," where women's language features are applied in an academic and professional discourse. Therefore, this research included in the scope of pragmatic and gender in public communication, which examines how language is used strategically.

The main concept of this research is the theory of women's language features (WLF), which Robin Lakoff introduced in *Language and Woman's Place* (1975). This theory explains that women's language has certain distinctive features which speakers use to indicate uncertainty, soften statements, or maintain interpersonal relationships (Lakoff, 1975). This perspective then Holmes (1995) and Coates (2015) develop further, where WLF is emphasized not only to represent weakness or subordination, but can be understood as a communicative strategy. The distinction between male and female communication styles highlights how WLF tends to prioritize emotional closeness with the audience (Tannen, 1990). In the context of TED Talks, WLF theory is relevant to explain how these traits use not only as gender expression but also as rhetorical strategic that increase connection with a global audience.

Researchers have previously investigated the use of women's language features across variety of contexts, such as fiction work where dialogue is scripted. (Wiprayanti et al., 2022; Kiranidewi et al., 2023; Rahmawati & Sayogie, 2023; Sidemen et al., 2023), celebrity interviews (Adi et al., 2022), debate competitions (Utami et al., 2022), and public speeches (Hancock & Rubin, 2014; Azlia, 2022). More recent research has analyzed TED Talks of female speakers and some of Lakoff's features have been identified (Afrilya & Idayani, 2023; Nasution et al., 2024). However, these studies are descriptive, focusing more on identifying linguistic forms rather than examining their rhetorical and persuasive functions in professional public discourse.

We therefore analyzed Jennifer Parlamis's TED Talks "*Why Venting Doesn't Help You with Anger*" to explore how women's language features are not only as markers of gendered communication but also as rhetorical tools to build credibility and audience engagement. By placing WLF within the framework of gender-based pragmatics and communication, this research offers a deep understanding of how women's language functions as a strategic and persuasive discourse in global public communication. From this gap, this study formulated two research questions: (1) What characteristics of women's language feature appear in Jennifer Parlamis' TED Talk? (2) How do the pragmatics and rhetoric of these features function in the context of professional public speaking? By addressing these questions, this study aims to demonstrate that WLF in professional public discourse function as rhetorical strategies that build credibility, empathy, and audience engagement in a global communication context.

METHOD

This research employed descriptive qualitative design to examine the use of women's language features (WLF) in Jennifer Parlamis' TED Talks. Qualitative design was chosen because it enables the researchers to describe and interpret linguistic phenomena in its natural context rather than measure it numerically. This approach aligns with Creswell (2014) that stated qualitative design is appropriately used to analyze language, behavior, and social interaction. Through this design, the researchers were able to analyze systematically how certain linguistic forms functioned in rhetorical structure and pragmatic based on the speech video. The primary data for this study were obtained from Jennifer Parlamis' TED Talk entitled "*Why Venting Doesn't Help You with Anger*" published in the official website of TEDx Talks. The video was selected because it presented an example of professional yet emotionally engaging speech, suitable for analyzing WLF in public communication. The video with approximately 15 minutes duration downloaded and transcribed manually to ensure the accuracy to capture the pauses, repetitions, emphatic stress, and intonational shifts. Manual transcription is considered important in linguistic qualitative research because it preserves the detail that

may be lost in automatic transcription (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). After the transcription process, identified and coded utterances that contained indicators of WLF based on Lakoff's (1975) framework. This procedure was conducted to determine the linguistic forms used by the speaker and to prepare the data for subsequent functional analysis. The researchers categorized each utterance according to Lakoff's (1975) typology of WLF. Each identified feature was then analyzed to determine its pragmatic and rhetorical functions within the talk. The researchers interpreted the data using the frameworks proposed by Holmes (1995). To ensure accuracy and reliability, the transcription and coding results were reviewed twice, and each identified WLF instance was cross-checked against multiple theoretical references to minimize interpretation bias.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The data analysis identified the occurrence of women's language features (WLF) in Jennifer Parlamis' TED Talk "Why Venting Doesn't Help You with Anger." The classification followed Lakoff's (1975) theory and further expansions by Holmes (1995) and Coates (2015).

Table 1. Women's Language Features

No.	Women's Language Features	Frequency
1.	Emphatic Stress	135
2.	Lexical Hedges	43
3.	Rising Intonation	40
4.	Intensifiers	38
5.	Empty Adjectives	16
6.	Tag Questions	3
7.	Superpolite Forms	2
8.	Avoid Strong Swear Words	-
9.	Hypercorrect Grammar	-
10.	Precise Color Terms	-

As shown in Table 1, emphatic stress appeared as the most dominant feature, followed by lexical hedges, rising intonation, intensifiers, and so on. These findings suggest that the speaker relies heavily on mitigation and emphasis strategies rather than overt emotional expression.

Emphatic Stress

Example 1: "This is when you **over-attribute** someone's behaviour to something internal to them."

Emphatic stress could be considered as a type of "intensifier" non-lexical that strengthens the speaker's statement. According to Lakoff (1975), this feature is one of the ways for women in public communication to emphasize the idea smoothly to avoid sounding aggressive or dominant. Holmes (1995) further notes that emphatic stress directs audience attention to key information, in this case the word "over-attribute," signaling that the tendency to blame internal character over situational factors is the central claim of the argument. Coates (2015) adds that in women's discourse, prosodic emphasis functions collaboratively does not impose meaning on the audience but rather invites them to focus collectively on what matters. In terms of its pragmatic function, emphatic stress in this utterance works as a signal that tells the audience where to direct their attention, essentially saying "this is the important part." At the rhetorical level, this choice helps Parlamis come across as someone who is both knowledgeable and easy to follow, rather than intimidating or overly academic. In other words, the way she stresses certain words does not simply reflect how women typically speak; rather, it is a conscious choice to make her message clearer, more convincing, and more accessible to a diverse global audience.

Example 2: "And they found that physiologically arousing activities **do not** decrease anger."

Another example of emphatic stress can be seen in the utterance "And they found that physiologically arousing activities do not decrease anger." In this sentence, Parlamis places a stronger stress on the words "do not," which makes the negation stand out clearly to the audience. This is important because she is delivering a finding that goes against what most people commonly believe that doing something physically intense, like exercise or screaming, can help release anger. By stressing "do not," she makes sure the audience does not miss the point that this popular belief is actually not supported by research. Lakoff (1975) notes that emphatic stress allows the speaker to highlight something important in a non-aggressive way, which is exactly what Parlamis does here. Emphatic stress also helps signal to the audience that certain information is very important or as a collaborative way of saying 'this part matters'. Pragmatically, emphasis on "do not" helps Parlamis convey the findings of this research in a way that feels clear and informative. While rhetorically, her credibility as a speaker who bases her argument on evidence is strengthened and keeping the tone approachable at the same time. Emphatic stress in this context directs the audience's attention precisely where the argument needs it most.

Lexical Hedges

Example 1: "And I thought **maybe** he didn't care about safety."

"Maybe," "I think," and "kind of" are examples of lexical hedges that soften the power of a statement, making it sound less absolute. Lakoff (1975) states that the hedges allow the speakers to express their opinions in a gentle way without sounds too dominant. In this utterance, the word "maybe" indicates that Parlamis does not claim her husband as someone who did not care about safety, but she presents the situation like a guess or personal interpretation. Making such a direct assumption about another person could feel judgmental to the audience. Hedges work as a politeness strategy to soften statements that could otherwise feel too blunt or uncomfortable for the listener to hear (Lakoff, 1995). Parlamis uses "maybe" to create a space where the audience can relate to her experience and form their own understanding of the situation. It is a way to invite listeners to think along with her rather than passively receive the information. What makes "maybe" effective here is how it reduces the risk of sounding judgmental while still making the personal story interesting to follow, positioning Parlamis as someone who have a real experience making her speech feel real and authentic.

Example 2: "And **I thought**, well, this is really important because we have anger all around us all the time."

Another instance of lexical hedging can be seen in the utterance "And I thought, well, this is really important because we have anger all around us all the time." Here, the phrase "I thought" functions as an epistemic hedge that frames what follows as a personal reflection rather than an objective claim. By saying "I thought" instead of simply asserting "this is really important," Parlamis signals to the audience that she is sharing her own reasoning process, not dictating a conclusion. Interestingly, the addition of "well" further softens the statement and creates a brief pause that mimics natural thinking out loud, making the utterance feel spontaneous and genuine rather than rehearsed. Epistemic hedges reduce the force of a statement by positioning it as the speaker's personal interpretation, which in turn makes the audience feel less pressured to immediately agree (Holmes, 1995). This idea further explained by Coates (2015) that hedges invite the audience into the speaker's thought process, creating a sense of shared discovery rather than one-sided instruction. As a pragmatic device, "I thought" softens what could otherwise sound like an authoritative claim about the importance of anger, making it feel more like an honest personal realization. In doing so, she draws the audience closer to her as a person, they are not just listening to an expert, but following

along with someone who thinks and feels the way they do, which makes the message feel more genuine.

Rising Intonation

Example: "I found out that actually venting does not release anger."

Rising intonation is a non-lexical feature that makes a declarative sound like a question at the end of the statement. Rising intonation is also a communication strategy to deliver ideas while maintaining a friendly tone. In this context, rising intonation is also used to arouse the curiosity of the audience. When Parlamis presents finding that challenge common assumptions with rising intonation, the contradiction feel softer and more like a new discovery. The choice of phrase "I found out" with rising intonation at the end of the statement also frames the finding as personal experience. Thus, the rising intonation in this utterance function as the strategy to build openness in the professional public discourse. The interaction feels more like conversation between equal people, reduces the risk of the audience feeling lectured.

Intensifiers

Example: "This *really* bothered me."

Intensifiers such as "really" and "very" reinforce the emotional or evaluative power of a statement, so that the statement feels more sincere. This feature allows the speaker to express emotions more strongly without sounds as aggressive or overwhelming but the statement remain friendly and profound. In this example, the word "really" shows that Parlamis is not only slightly irritated but it really stayed with her; and that this moment is personally important to pay attention to. Without "really," the sentence "this bothered me" would feel like a passing observation. Holmes (1995) highlights that intensifiers function to mark key emotional moments in a narrative, helping the audience identify where to direct their empathic attention. In TED Talk context, where the audience is made up of strangers who the speaker needs to pull into their personal story, the word "really" signifies honesty that makes it easier for the audience to trust. The intensifier marks a turning point in her personal narrative while also building authenticity showing that her argument is deeply felt.

Empty Adjectives

Example: "He's a *hotshot* Wall Street lawyer now."

Empty adjectives do not add factual information to a statement, but add social meaning. In other words, the adjective tells the audience how something is supposed to be perceived. Lakoff (1975) notes that adjectives are used by women in public communication to build relationships and express emotion (e.g. beautiful, charming, cute). However, in professional settings, softer or more polite adjectives help women speaker to maintain a collaborative atmosphere with the audience. In this context, the word "hotshot" is particularly interesting because it contains ironic tone. The person being described (her husband) has achieved a high-status position, but the informal tone of the word slightly weakens his position. Parlamis does not say "he is a successful lawyer" but she says "hotshot," which signals to the audience she is not fully impressed by that. Holmes (1995) argues that subtle evaluations of empty adjectives convey without the speaker having to state them directly. These empty adjectives in speech serve a strategic tool for delivering social commentary in a natural way. "Hotshot" functioned pragmatically as a face-saving tool that allowed Parlamis to express critical social judgement without sounding bitter or judgmental, while rhetorically humor was also created to grab the audience's attention.

Tag Questions

Example: "Maybe you got cut off in traffic. Did you say, 'Oh, that person's so inconsiderate,' *right?*"

A tag question is a brief addition at the end of a statement that the audience is invited to agree with or respond to. In this example, the tag question is placed at the end

of a scenario that most people can relate which is got cut off in the traffic and directly blaming other drivers. By adding “right?”, Parlamis does not really ask if the audience agrees; the moment of mutual recognition she creates, gently encouraging the audience to see themselves in the situation she describes. This is a clever rhetorical move from Parlamis as the audience can feel seen and understood before the assumptions behind the reaction are challenged. Coates (2015) reinforces this point by emphasizing that tag questions are essentially collaborative, this signifies that the audience’s perspective is valued by the speaker. Tag question “right?” softening the implicit criticism in the scenario and basically the general cognitive bias is pointed out, but it does not feel like a judgement. In doing so, the audience is positioned as an active participant rather than passive listeners, which is what makes TED Talks both engaging and persuasive.

Superpolite Forms

Example: “You **might** be wondering what my husband is up to.”

A superpolite form is a highly indirect statements or expression that use modal verbs such as “might,” “could,” or “would” use to avoid impression of being commanding. This form is a feature which consideration of others is prioritized, especially in situations where direct assumption about someone can feel intrusive. In this example, Parlamis could have said “you are probably wondering about my husband” or “let me tell you about my husband” both of them would have been perfectly natural transitions. Instead, she chooses “you might be wondering,” which does something quite different. The word “might” acknowledges that the audience may or may not be curious about her husband, leaving them the freedom to either follow along or simply take the information as it comes. Holmes (1995) emphasizes that superpolite forms like this maintain harmonious interaction by minimizing imposition the speaker is essentially saying “I am not assuming I know what you are thinking, but in case you are curious, here it is.” The speaker actively works to protect the audience’s autonomy, making them feel respected rather than talked at. The audience feels invited into the story on their own terms rather than being pulled along and this is precisely what “might” achieve by softening the transition between Parlamis’ personal narrative and the analytical point she is about to make.

The results of this research indicate that emphatic stress is the most dominant feature in Jennifer Parlamis’ TED Talk. These findings differ from most previous studies, in which intensifiers and lexical hedges were identified as the most frequently used features (Wiprayanti et al., 2022; Kiranidewi et al., 2023; Rahmawati & Sayogie, 2023; Sidemen et al., 2023). The dominance of emphatic stress in this TED Talk can be interpreted through its rhetorical function. Holmes (1995) highlights that emphasis functions as a strategy to reinforce meaning, mark urgency, and guide the audience toward key information. Key words and phrases are often stress to direct the audience’s attention to the most important points, as seen in utterances such as “this is when you **over-attribute** someone’s behaviour...” and “physiologically arousing activities **do not** decrease...” In this way, the use of empathic stress is not only a feature of linguistic femininity, but also as a form rhetorical reinforcement with which credibility is built and audience understanding is formed. This suggests that in professional public speech, emphatic stress functions persuasive tool than the intensifiers commonly found in scripted media or casual conversation.

The use of lexical hedges appears as the second most frequently used feature. This is important because lexical hedges in the previous studies associate with informal conversation or expressions of uncertainty. However, in Parlamis’ speech, hedges such as “maybe,” “I think,” and “kind of” are used to build interpersonal closeness, reduce power distance, and create the impression of empathy that makes the audience feel invited into the process of reflection. Coates (2015) supports this by arguing that lexical hedges reflect an orientation of collaborative discourse with the audience to participate without simply accepted conclusions. Given that the main theme of Parlamis’ TED Talk deals emotional processes, psychology, and interpersonal relationships, the frequent use of hedges serves as an important tool to keep her statements supportive rather than

dismissive. This suggests a more complex rhetorical function of hedges than what has been reported in previous WLF research based on fictional or scripted media.

Avoidance of strong swear words, hypercorrect grammar, and precise color terms were not found in the data. The absence of swear word avoidance is not surprising given that TED Talks are a formal and professional platform where such language would be inappropriate regardless of the gender of the speaker (O'Barr & Atkins, 2005). The absence of hypercorrect grammar is also consistent with the conversational and natural style of speech of TED Talks that encourages speakers to generally avoid over-grammatical structures in order to keep their message feeling personal and easy to understand. Meanwhile, precise color terms were absent because the content of Parlamis' talk does not involve the description of visual objects or aesthetic qualities. As Lakoff (1975) confirms, this feature tends to appear only in contexts where such descriptions are relevant, making its absence in a psychologically oriented talk entirely expected.

Taken as a whole, these findings reveal that the use of WLF in professional public speaking does not simply follow the patterns identified in studies based on fictional works or everyday conversation. Rather than reflecting uncertainty or female subordination as Lakoff (1975) originally suggested, these features are shown to serve important rhetorical and pragmatic functions building interpersonal closeness, emphasizing key messages, and establishing professional credibility. This pattern is consistent with Coates' (2015) argument that women's language has evolved beyond its traditional associations with passivity or deference, functioning instead as a flexible and context-sensitive communicative resource. It also reinforces Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (2013) broader claim that gender is not simply reflected through language, but is strategically performed in response to the demands of specific communicative contexts and purposes. Parlamis' TED Talk demonstrates how WLF can be deployed effectively as both a persuasive and interpersonal strategy, enriching our understanding of how women's language functions in modern professional public discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the use of women's language features (WLF) in Jennifer Parlamis' TED Talk entitled "Why Venting Doesn't Help You with Anger," with a focus on how linguistic elements such as hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, and politeness strategies function beyond gender markers and operate as intentional rhetorical tools in professional public communication. The findings of this study show that Parlamis strategically employs these features to build credibility, highlight key information, and create a sense of empathy and closeness with her audience. These findings support the view that WLF have evolved beyond markers of femininity into flexible communicative resources shaped by context and pragmatic needs, consistent with Holmes (1995) and Coates (2015).

In answering the research questions, this study reveals that Parlamis uses WLF not as signals of uncertainty or subordination, but rather as persuasive tools that increase clarity, soften potentially confrontational statements, and emphasize important points in her argumentation. Emphatic stress emerges as the dominant feature because of its significant role in reinforcing key messages on emotionally sensitive topics such as anger. Meanwhile, the use of lexical hedges reflects the speaker's deliberate attempt to maintain an approachable tone and reduce power distance with her audience, distinguishing these findings from previous studies in fictional contexts where hedges primarily mark uncertainty. The absence of features such as avoidance of strong swear words, hypercorrect grammar, and precise color terms further reflects the professional and academic tone of TED Talk discourse.

This study contributes to the fields of pragmatics, gender, and public communication by offering a more dynamic interpretation of WLF in a real-life, globally mediated speaking context. By moving beyond the identification of linguistic forms toward an examination of their rhetorical and pragmatic functions, this study

demonstrates how WLF can facilitate audience engagement, emotional connection, and persuasive impact in professional discourse. These findings reinforce Coates' (2015) argument that women's language has evolved beyond its traditional associations with passivity, functioning instead as a context-sensitive communicative resource that speakers can deploy strategically regardless of gender. Future research may consider expanding the analysis to include male TED Talk speakers who employ similar features, or examining WLF across a broader range of professional speaking contexts, in order to further explore how gendered language features have been reappropriated as universal rhetorical strategies in contemporary public discourse.

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