

**A Feminist Linguistic Study of Charlotte Perkin
Gilman's the Yellow Wallpaper**

by

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ملخص البحث

يتناول البحث الملامح اللغوية التي تميز اللغة النسائية عن اللغة الخاصة بالرجال . أولاً يناقش البحث السؤال هل يوجد فعلاً ما يمكن تسميته باللغة النسائية؟ هناك خلاف قديم بين علماء اللغة والاجتماع علي وجود هذه اللغة وذهب البعض إلي هناك بعض الملامح التي تميز كلام النساء عن أمثالهم من الرجال بينما رفض بعضا منهم ذلك معللين ان الملامح اللغوية تتوقف علي المناسبة والسياق وغيرها.

أكدت لأكوف وجدير بالذكر أنها أول من أيدت وجود ما يسمي باللغة النسائية ومنها وجود السؤال المذيل و الجمل البسيطة والمتوسطة الطول و استخدام صفات وكلمات و أفعال خاصة بهم والتي بدورها تشير الي خضوعها واستسلامها وضعفها علي عكس لغة الرجال التي توضح قوتهم و سيطرتهم بجانب اختلافهم في الغرض من الحوار فالمرأة تتحدث عن المشاعر والأحاسيس و الاسره والأطفال وهدفها الرئيسي تقوية الروابط والتضامن الاجتماعي بينما الرجال تتحدث عن السياسية و حل المشكلات والواقع وتكثر في حواراتهم الأوامر والنهي والحقائق . كما ان النساء أكثر تأدبا في حديثهم من الرجال لأنهن دائماً مترددات و خائفات من رد فعل الطرف الآخر.

ومن خلال قراءة قصة ورق الحائط الأصفر يتضح لنا وجود العديد من تلك الملامح بدءاً من موضوع القصة وهو معاناة المرأة من انهيار ما بعد الولادة ومدى سيطرة زوجها في كيفية و مكان علاجها ورفضه ومنعه لها من الكتابة رغم انها هوايتها المفضلة معللاً رفضه بأنها يعيق علاجها.

واختار المنزل وبل الغرفة التي تقيم بها وبدأت المعاناة تزيد لأنها تشعر بان المنزل مسكون و الغرفة تبدو كالزنزانة وورق الحائط الأصفر التي تكرهه ومع مرور الوقت بدأت تري شبح امرأة مسجونة خلف ورق الحائط الذي يبدو وكأنه أسوار حديد وازدادت حالتها سوءاً فاخذت في نزع ورق الحائط لتحرر السجينة و أخذت ترحف علي رجلها

ويدها مثلها ودخل زوجها فاغشي عليه من هول المشهد واستمرت في الزحف فوق جسمه.

الكاتبة تتحدث عن مشاعرها و احساسها و عن الطبيعة والألوان واستخدامها لبعض الصفات والجمل والأفعال وكلها تؤكد وجود اللغة النسائية او الملامح اللغوية الخاصة باللغة النسائية.

Abstract

The paper tries to prove that there is a female language. There are some linguistic features that distinguish female's speech from male's speech. Those features can be easily detected in their speech like: question tag, emotional words, personal themes, and colours, referring to nature, certain usage of pronouns, simple sentence and present simple tense. The study will extract those features from Gilman's novella *the Yellow Wallpaper* as an evidence for the existence of what is called a female language.

Keywords: female language, male language, polite, simple sentence, colours, emotional, question-tags, pronouns, feminism, genderlect, hedges, 'dominance approach', 'difference approach', intensifier, subordinate, and cooperative.

Introduction

Is there a female language? Is a female language a language?

It is talk or language through which relationships are established or broken. Communication between sexes has been of great interest for both scholars and lay people. Both of them try to find out the sources of communication differences (Suciu: 1).

Some linguists have claimed that men and women come from different planets. Hence, they have different ways of thinking and speaking. They try to answer the question why we don't understand each other (as males and females) when we communicate (Tannen: 31).

Aims of Study:

The study tries to answer the following questions:

Is there a female language?

Does female language differ from male language?

Are there specific linguistic features which distinguish female speech from male's one?

Can those features be detected easily?

Gender is one of the axes around which the world revolves. It is gender through which people encode their experience.

Language is essential to understanding our gendered selves. Through language, we display ‘ourselves as gendered beings’ (Wright: 51). Some linguists think that males and females are genetically ‘unsuited to communicate successfully to each other’ (Suciu: 1).

Different geographical areas, different beliefs, and class background are main reasons for different ways of speaking. This means that we learn to use language differently. Consequently, different conversational styles are a result of being male or female. According to Giulia Suciu, male and female are different in many aspects: their behavior, thinking and speech exactly as differ biologically, physically and psychologically (ibid: 7). She says that their difference is ‘undebateble’ (ibid: 7). They speak the same language but with different meanings, connotations and metalanguage. They speak differently but no one sex’s speech is superior or inferior to the other.

The term ‘genderlect’ has been coined to refer to the language of the two sexes. The term dialect refers to a variety of a language that is related to geography or family background or to a speaker’s role, while the term genderlect is related to the speaker’s sexual gender (West and Zimmer: 51). The most important term in the studies of genderlect is ‘difference’; the differences between males and females are of great importance

to the extent that they occupied thousands of pages of articles, books and researches. Genderlect provides answers to the questions ‘why don’t you understand? And why don’t you listen to me? (Voegeli: 17) Gender linguistics is concerned with the way males and females speak or spoken about. So, it has two main fields of study: how genders speak (or write), and how they are spoken (or written) about (ibid: 23).

Feminist linguists try to prove that language was made by males and is used as an instrument of social oppression of women. They try to create female– centered language in order to eliminate social injustice to females (A.L. Dorodnykh and A.P.Martyniuk:177).

A woman’s tongue wags like a lamb’s tail.

If three women gather together, it becomes clamorous.

According to Yurki Mizokami, these proverbs and others in many societies are a good evidence for the existence of negative attitudes relating to women and language. (Yurki: 141).

Feminism has been developed since 1970’s. Many linguists have conducted researches on differences between the sexes to penetrate the features that distinguish both the male and the female languages. Most of the researchers have regarded men’s language as the ‘norm’, while women’s language is the deviation from the norm (ibid: 143)

Early works on female's language:

One of the rare and very early works on female language is Jespersen's work *Language: its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922). In chapter 'the Woman', Jespersen argues that women speak more politely than men and they have vocabularies that are more or less varied. In addition, they use particular adjective and adverb usage like 'pretty' and 'so'.

Language and Women's Place (1975) by Robin Lakoff is considered the beginning of the twentieth-century linguistic interest in female language. Her study is known as 'Lakoff's – hypothesis'. She argues that females use more 'empty' adjectives such as 'divine', 'charming' and 'lovely'. They use more intensifiers such as 'so', 'really' and 'very'. They use more hedges, tag questions, rising intonation and more polite forms than males (Lakoff: 144). Lakoff argues that these female linguistic features are a result of linguistic subordination. Feminist language lacks authority, seriousness and confidence.

Katherine Lambertz and Melanie Hebrok support Lakoff's view that feminist language has universal features: tentativeness and uncertainty through the extensive use of linguistic devices (Lambertz et al: 40). One example of female's tentativeness is the frequent use of 'hedges; i.e., linguistic devices that weaken the force of an utterance in a situational speech. They add that

females' usage of mitigating devices gives 'the impression that the speaker lacks authority'.

Moreover, they believe that those universal features of feminist language are 'super-politeness, avoidance of profane language and heightened indirectness' (ibid:40). They interpret the females' use of tag question at the end of a statement as they offer the speaker a way to make an assertion without 'committing herself to its truthfulness' (ibid:40). Tag questions allow the listener to disagree or object without attacking the speaker directly. In other words, females use these devices to avoid 'making strong declarations and taking responsibility for their assertion' (ibid: 40).

Lakoff is considered the very first feminist researcher who dealt with female language. Moreover, studies after her, on female language, are based on her work. In other words, they (the studies) either support or criticize her 'hypothesis'.

Studies after Lakoff are divided into two categories: 'the dominance approach' and 'the difference'.

The dominance approach accounts for the linguistic differences between males' and females' languages as a reflection of females' subordination and males' dominance. Fishman (1980) and Zimmerman & West (1975) are examples for this approach. They support Lakoff's 'hypothesis'. Zimmerman

finds out that females use more hedges and questions to facilitate conversations. She justifies this by saying that men have the upper hand in any conversation. In addition, females use less interruption than men. Those who support this approach explain their findings as sexual inequalities and a woman's inferiority (West and Zimmerman: 147).

The difference approach advocates that the linguistic differences in males' and females' speeches are due to different subcultures. Supporters of this approach are: Maltz&Borker (1982), Jones (1980) and Coates (1989). They claim that the linguistic differences between the two sexes are a result of subcultural differences between them. According to Suciu, male and female are anatomically different. They have different hormones that may influence their behavior and attitudes. Furthermore, they may process information differently.

According to this approach, the socialization process that includes family, friends and school, contributes to femaleness and maleness of humans. Suciu says, quoting Tannen, 'women and men have different past experiences. From the same time they were born they were treated differently, talked to differently, and talk differently as a result' (Tannen 1986: 125) (Suciu: 2).

Supporters of this approach assert that we, males and females, acquire our linguistic competence from an early age. In

other words, we socialize in different ways (7). Moreover, Suciú says ‘the fact that women’s speech differs from men’s speech is accepted in much the same way the psychological differences between the sexes are accepted, and because language is perceived as an innate and essential part of our humanity, sex differences in language are treated as a natural genetic...(Baron 1986 :55) (Suciú:7).

Comparing female language to Male language:

It has been observed that male and female speech differs from each other in form, topic, content and usage (Haas: 616). In topic and content, men talk about money, sports, and business (ibid: 617). They refer more frequently to time, space, quantity, physical movements and objects, while women are more ‘expressive, supportive and polite’. They (women) talk more about ‘family, home, feelings, emotions, interpretation and psychological state’ (ibid: 617).

Lakoff (1975) has a pioneering work in this field. She has found out two specific types of phrase in females’ speech namely: hedges and tag questions. She has concluded that females’ language convey their uncertainty and subordination. They use extra-polite forms.

According to Voegeli, women are more likely to speak more grammatically correct and use more well-formed sentences.

Added to that, they speak more politely than men. This may justify their excess usage of hedge. They are more cooperative. They tend to foster and facilitate the conversation. They ask more questions. They speak in a 'more personal and emotion-related way' (Voegeli: 49).

On the other hand, men's speech tends to more colloquial, more direct and factual. Thus, they use more imperatives and more directives. According to Mulac, Bradac and Gibbons : 'questions are more common in women's contributions to dyadic interactions, whereas directives that tell the audience to do something are more likely to be found in men's conversational contributions'' (Mulac et al:213).Their speech revolves around themselves. In conversation, they are informational. Mathew .L. Newman, Carla J. Groom, Lori D. Handelsmand and James W. Pennebaker (who used standardized categories to analyze a database of over 14000 text files from 70 separate studies) state that men tend to use language more for instrumental purpose "of conveying information'(Mulac: 212) and women are more likely to use language for social purpose and verbal interaction and regard this as an end in itself (ibid: 212). They add that women use words that are more related to psychological and social processes, whereas, men's words refer to object properties and impersonal topics (ibid: 212).

Mulac, Studley and Blau found out that if sentence length is calculated 'women come out as the wordier gender both in writing and speaking (Mulac et al: 213)'. Moreover, men take more 'turns' in conversation and make more interruptions (ibid: 213).

Lakoff (1975) states that: 'the more one compounds a request, the more characteristic it is of women's speech (Lakoff: 617). In addition, females use double compound request like 'won't you please close the door?' (ibid:617). She observed that men use stronger expletives such as 'shit' and 'damn', but women use weaker or softer profanity such as 'oh dear', or 'goodness' (ibid:618). She finds out that men use 'coarse' and free language while women use 'euphemistic' language. Men use more swear words than women (ibid: 618).

Lakoff notes that men in their anger 'expressive', while women in their exclamations are likely to 'convey enthusiasm' (ibid: 618). Women's speech is more polite than men's one. She noticed that in general, women use longer sentences than those of men, but in some situations and under certain conditions, they use shorter ones (ibid: 620). Women's language is more 'emotional' and 'evaluative' than men's language (ibid: 620). Men refer more to 'time, space, and quantity and destructive action', while, women use more words which denote 'feeling, emotion, or motivation (whether positive, negative, or neutral); they use more 'auxiliary

words and negations' (ibid: 621). Women make more self-reference.

Jespersen (P: 615) found out that females leaves sentences unfinished or dangling. They are more frequently interrupted than men. This justifies the unfinished sentences (ibid: 619). He added that women are fond of 'hyperbole and greater use of adverbs of intensity such as awful, pretty, terribly nice, quite' (ibid: 621).

Bernard (1972), in Holmes' (women, Men and politeness) stated that men are assertive in the sense that they 'convey information and fact'. Their style of speech tends to debate, assert, argue, and command. On the contrary, Lakoff observed that women's speech is nonassertive. So, they use tag questions. This form of questions avoids assertion and gives the addressee the option of agreeing or disagreeing. Women are more reluctant to force or impose their views on the addressees. They use qualifiers such as 'perhaps, I suppose, probably (ibid: 623). Their speech contains more polite forms, apology, laughter, crying and unfinished sentences. Females' favorite topics are about family and home. On the other hand, males' speech tends to slang and contains profanity, and obscenity. Their favorite topics are sports, money and business (Holmes 1995: 43).

Studies have been conducted on the differences between females' and males' speech. Those researchers believe that we

can learn more about genders by ‘studying their underlying thoughts, motives, and emotions (Mathew L. Newman and others: 215). According to them ‘this can be done by counting and categorizing words they use to communicate’. So, they have a corpus linguistic study of function words stating that ‘it is fruitful with function words’ like: pronouns, articles, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. Because these words are to cohere or to ‘glue’ and join the text and words together unlike content words (nouns, verbs, adjective and adverbs). They believe that an examination of gender difference in the usage of function words reflects on the psychology of both genders. This examination penetrates the different ways of thinking about and relating to the world (Newman et al: 215). They go further to say that ‘the words that best discriminate between male and female are function words’ (ibid: 212).

They concluded that using ‘you and I’ instead of ‘we’ reveals a different dimension of the relationship between the speaker and the referent. The preference of using pronouns instead of the nouns refers to a shared reality and knowledge between speaker and listener. The usage of the first–person singular pronoun can be ‘associated with age, depression, illness; and more broadly self–focus (based on Penne baker &Lay, 2002) (ibid: 216)’. Female’s language is more likely to include pronouns and social

words, a great deal of psychological process references (mad, uneasy, remember, nervous), social process (sister, friends) verbs (watching, talking, thinking,) negations (can't, not), and references to home than that of male's language (ibid: 223). Men exceeded women in some linguistic features like word length, number, articles and prepositions. Regarding topic, men discuss current concerns (assignment, an apartment) and swear more often. Men, also, use more articles (a bit, the music, a journal) (ibid: 224).

Women communicate, according to the same study, their internal processes like doubts, thoughts, emotions (negative and positive), and senses through their great usage of present and past tenses. On the other hand, men refer to external events, objects and processes through their speech about sports, occupation, and money. They use numbers, articles, prepositions, long words and swear words more than women (ibid: 221). Women aim to establish a 'rapport' style, dealing with social topics, whereas men 'report' more often, describing the quantity and location of objects. So, women are expressive, supportive, tentative and polite. Men talk to establish' statuses, their conversation in public, while women speak to make intimacy and talk in private more often. Men try to solve problems but women need sympathy. As a result, women prefer indirect ways of

speech, while men prefer the referential function of language, so, they use direct imperatives. This study that uses LIWC is a word-based text analysis system (ibid: 230).

Suzanne and Romaine compared male to female introductions to stories. They found out that male opens his book with ‘a recitation of facts’, while the female opens her book with ‘the protagonist’s thoughts’ (Suzanne and Romaine: 43). Moreover, they found out that males tend to use more ‘informational’ features and prepositions are among those features and also prepositional phrases which functions as a noun modifier. They use more than females (ibid: 44).

To summarize those features which distinguish female language from male language, we quote Franziska Voegeli’s table (24):

Female language	Male language
Lexis	Lexis
Differentiated vocabulary in trivial areas	Stronger swear words
Weaker swear words	Neutral adjectives
Adjectives evoking frivolity & triviality	
More intensifying adverbs	

Syntax	Syntax
Tag questions	Colloquial language dialect
Subordinate clauses	Elliptic sentences
Average length of sentences	directives
Introductory adverbial clauses	
Standard language norms	
More polite	Locative (factual)
Minimal reactions to show interest	Relating to quantity (factual)
Cooperative conversational style	Focus
More personal	Judgmental utterance
Relate to emotions	

Males use number and females don't. Males are less personal and more specified (Voegeli: 24).

The previous framework will be applied to a novella by Charlotte

Perkins Gilman. The paper tries to prove that these features like, question-tag, simple sentence structure, colors, present simple tense, emotional and more personal words are employed by the writer, in the sense that is a female language.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It was published in 1892. she wrote many poems, essays, short stories and autobiography. Yellow Wallpaper is her masterpiece (The Guardian: 25). It is based on her own difficult

post-partum experience. It is clear from the very beginning that there is a feminist linguistic feature, namely, the theme of the story which is based on a personal experience of the author (Goodreads:12). This is typically feminist. Some critics deal with this piece as a novella.

The narrator, the author also, has a postpartum bad experience and her husband, who works as a doctor, decides to travel to their house in the country to be treated. This travel is against his wife's will and desire (Biography: 3). But John, her husband, believes that this will be on her behalf, for her rest and recovery. The author doubts the necessity of such stay. She thinks that this house is haunted. It is the husband who decides where to stay. He chooses a room which she does not like at all. According to her, the room looks like a prison as the windows have iron bars, the bed is nailed to the floor, and there is a gate at the top of the stairs. Furthermore, there are yellow wallpapers on the walls that seem ugly and disturbing. They (wallpapers) are pulled off the wall in strips. She spends almost most of her times staring at them. She feels that the wallpaper has two levels: a front pattern and a shadowy figure trapped behind its bars. After some time, she believes that this shadow is a woman imprisoned like herself. She begins to make parallels between herself and the female shadow. Her husband shows his patriarchal power

and dominance by laughing at her "fancies". His reaction is natural and, according to her, "it is expected in marriage". This implies his indifference to her opinion and feelings. Even her way of writing depicts her powerlessness and submissiveness as her story as notes or dairy fearing any one can read them.

The woman, behind the bars in the wallpaper, becomes an obsession. The imprisoned woman begins to crawl behind the paper. By time, she sees the woman, out of the window in the garden, creeping on her hands and knees. The narrator, sympathizing with her, begins to peel off the wallpaper to release the woman trapped behind the wallpaper. John and his sister, Jennie, suspect that there is something terribly wrong happens.

On their last night, the narrator asks Jennie not to disturb her as she wants to sleep. Being alone, she locks herself in her room to be uninterrupted to have enough time to peel the wallpaper to free the poor woman. John breaks down the door and finds his wife crawling on the torn paper, screaming that she is free at last and no one can imprison her again behind the wall paper. Her husband faints and his wife continues her creeping over his body.

Gilman does not intend this novella to be a feminist. She says that it is meant to save women from further sufferings under the rest cure. This novella is viewed as a horror story as those of

Edgar Allan Poe. Moreover, some critics argue that the novella includes supernatural horror.

With the advent of Feminist scholarship in 1970's, the novella begins to be treated as a feminist work as the story emphasis the male superiority over female. The overall theme is gender. The narrator is a powerless and submissive woman, struggles against her husband's over dominance and superiority. It is John who determines what she does, he prevents her from writing on the basis that it is against her cure, who she sees and where she recovers from her illness. Even her brother supports him and agrees to him. She struggles for freedom. She suffers from "hysteria" that belittles women as "overly emotional" person. Her only way to freedom is just through insanity. The other female character does not fight for freedom; she seems a surrendered person (Goodreads: 33).

Feminist linguistic features in the novella:

Apart from theme of male dominance and independence vs. female powerlessness, submissiveness and dependence there are other linguistic features:

The language is personal: the story is narrated in the first person singular "I": " I would say a haunted house' ", "I am sitting by the window' ", "personally, I disagree with their ideas ", " and personally I believe that...would do me good" and so forth. She

sometimes uses the pronoun "we". The story itself is based on a personal experience and so it tells about a woman who suffers from a postpartum illness and her treatment. This is a typical female linguistic feature: they talk about family, psychology, and emotion.

The language is emotional: the narrator tells most about her feelings and emotions: "it always makes me feel bad", " I am afraid", "I don't care", "I don't like our room", " I get positively angry", "I was crying", "I can't sleep "and so forth. She says that she is very afraid of her husband.

The tenses that are used mostly present simple tense. But there are other tenses like past simple and future simple tenses:

"I never saw a worse paper in my life".

"I did write for a while in spite of them"

" I wish I could get well faster".

“This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had"

Colours are very important in the novella even the title itself yellow: " the color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow". There are other Colours in the story: " dull yet lurid orange", green, and black.

Nature is everywhere in the story. Many aspects of nature are described:

Sunlight "strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight", "mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees", " great elms and velvet meadows" , sun, roses, seaweeds, the moon, moonlight, fog, wind, rain, trees, the weather, cloud and leaves.

The length of the sentences is average: " it is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for summer", " John is practical in the extreme" .There are many subordinate clauses like if clause: " if only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one I mean to try it, little by little", "if that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her1".

The narrator uses adjectives like: queer "he seems very queer...and even Jennie has an inexplicable look", intense, careful, loving, "such a dear baby", "lovely shaded", "awfully lazy", tired, sick, "impressionable little thing", admirable, pretty, perfect and beautiful. She uses intensifiers like such and so.

She uses words like fancy and repeats it many times: "silly fancy", "false and foolish fancy", and "my darling".

She repeats a rhetorical question "what can one do?" , "what is one to do? 'Many times in the story and that implies her powerlessness, dependence and submissiveness. This also proves that she cannot determine, hesitant, and dependence. In

addition, she uses reporting many times: she says that he said "that after the wall- paper was changed...", again she says "John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making...". Also, she uses expressions like I think, I believe, I suppose, I fancy, I wish and I feel. This is typical female language along with the linguistic features discussed before in the paper.

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