

## **WOMEN'S LANGUAGE FEATURES IN MICHELLE OBAMA'S SPEECH "THE FIRST LADY ON THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING ABROAD"**

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### **Abstract**

Many factors influence men and women's use of language. One of them is gender. The research entitled *The Analysis of Women's Language Features found in Michelle Obama's Speech "The First Lady on the Importance of Studying Abroad"* aims to identify women's language features based on Lakoff theory found in Michelle Obama's speech. This research was collected using a descriptive qualitative method while collecting the data were watching the video several times and reading the transcript of Michelle Obama's speech containing the women's language features on Youtube. The data were analysed by using Lakoff (1975) on women's language. The result of this research shows that there are 89 items found, 18 items or 20% of lexical hedges or fillers, 1 item or 1% of rising intonation on declaratives, 13 items or 15% of intensifiers, and 57 items or 64% of emphatic stress.

**Keywords:** women's language feature, Michelle Obama's speech, gender

### **Introduction**

Michelle Obama is an important person, she is a lawyer, writer, and wife of the former President of the USA, Barack Obama. The researcher chose this video because this video was delivered by the First Lady to American and Chinese students at the Stanford Center at Peking University on the importance of studying abroad. The first lady makes the researcher interested to do the research related to women's language features.

This research focuses on women's language features to answer these questions: (1) Which part of women's language features found in Michelle Obama's speech? And (2) What is the function of those women's language features used by Michelle Obama in her speech? It was expected that this research can inspire another researcher to analyze a speech or movie through linguistics point of view, especially about women's language features. Hopefully, this research can be a reference for future researcher.

A great deal of literature has elaborated the relationship between language and gender (Pasaribu, 2016; Pasaribu, 2017). Eckert (2003) states that gender takes a role in differentiating the function, social roles, and responsibilities of men and women in a community. Gender is related to the process of situations; how should men and women take a role and act in accordance with the values of structured, social and cultural that placed where they are.

According to Lakoff (in Holmes, 2017) women were using language which reinforced their subordinate status. Women, as compared with men, use more linguistic categories that connote uncertainty. There are ten women's language features. They are 1) Lexical hedges or fillers, 2) Tag questions, 3) Rising intonation on declarative, 4) Empty adjective, 5) Precise color terms, 6) Intensifiers, 7) Hypercorrect grammar, 8) Superpolite forms, 9) Avoidance of strong swear words, and 10) Emphatic stress.

a. Lexical hedges or fillers

Oktapiani (2017) said that lexical hedges are used to weaken the strength of assertion. Some hedge examples are: you know, sort of, I think, I'm sure, and some modal auxiliaries like might, may, would, should, etc. Fillers are similar with some meaningless words that are usually used by women such as: well, umm, uh, ah, etc. Hedges and fillers can be concluded as a pause-shaped phrases contained in the conversation to fill the breath gap. This can be assumed as "meaningless particle".

b. Tag questions

Lakoff (as cited in White 2003) the tag question, similarly, can be interpreted as a hedging device which weakens women's speech. Lakoff argues that asking a question is the best example of insecurity and doubt for women. They use tag questions to show that she believes with her statement and it would be trusted. For example: She is very nice, isn't it?

c. Rising intonation on declaratives

Lakoff (1975) states that Related to the use of syntactic rule, she found a widespread difference perceptible in women's intonation patterns. There is a peculiar sentence intonation pattern found in English only among women which has the form of declarative answer to a question, and is used as such, but has the rising inflection typical of yes/no question, as well as being especially hesitant. The effect is as though one were seeking confirmation, though at the same time the speaker may be the only one who has the requisite information (p.17).

d. Empty Adjective

Adjective that has a specific meaning and literal and also indicate approval or admiration to something are called empty adjective. It means that it only concerns the word that show emotional reaction through specific interaction. Some examples are: divine, charming, cute, lovely, etc.

e. Precise Colour Term

Women are much more precise in naming detail colors than men. Men think that talking about the precise colour is ridiculous since they think that it is irrelevant to the real world. Some examples of precise colour terms are: magenta, beige, lavender, aquamarine, etc.

f. Intensifiers

The use of intensifiers is to employ the intense sentences which a speaker says, whether to decrease or increase it (Amanda, 2017). The intensive “so” is more frequent occurs in women’s than men’s language. Substituting an intensifier like “so” for absolute superlative (like, very, really,) seems to be way of backing out of committing oneself strongly to an opinion.

g. Hypercorrect Grammar

Lakoff (1975) stated that, “Hypercorrection includes the use of standard forms and pronunciation.” This feature shows that women tend not to use double negatives such as ain’t.

h. Superpolite Forms

Women likes to keep their utterances polite. Lakoff (as cited in Talbot, 2010) found that there are three forms of superpolite forms, which are avoidance of swearing words, extensive use of euphemism, and using more particles in a request sentence.

i. Avoidance of Strong Swear Words

Women known as a soft person, that is why they don’t do swear words, because if they do they will consider as unladylike. As Lakoff said, “Women are not supposed to talk rough” (2004, p.80).

j. Emphatic Stress

Speakers tend to use emphatic stress in order to emphasize the message they deliver (Lakoff, 2004). The use of emphatic stress helps the speaker to give more intention to the message they want to deliver to the audience, so they will pay more attention to the speaker.

## Method

This research is a descriptive qualitative method because it analyzes the data in from of utterance descriptively. Base on Ary (2010) Qualitative researchers may use written documents or other artefacts to gain an understanding of the phenomenon under study. The data were taken from Michelle Obama’s utterance in her speech on YouTube video. This video was published on March 22, 2014. Her utterances in the video were analyzed according to the research question: which part of women’s language Features found in Michelle Obama’s speech?

The steps in analyzing the data were: 1) watched the video of Michelle Obama’s published by The Obama White House, 2) listened to women’s language Features found in video, 3) highlighted the transcription of women’s language Features of the speech, 4) classified the utterance based on the Features of women’s language, and 5) draw conclusions based on the findings.

## Findings and Discussion

In this part, the researchers served and discussed the data that have found from the speech video of Michelle Obama and to answer the research questions. The research questions are (1) Which part of women’s language Features found in Michelle Obama’s speech? And (2) What is the function of those women’s language Features used by Michelle Obama in her speech?

***The Frequency of Women's Language Features Used by Michelle Obama***

In this part, the focus is on the frequency of women's language Features found in Michelle Obama's Speech in 2014. Based on Lakoff's theory (1975), there are ten types of women's language Features. However, in this research, the researchers only found four women's language Features that Michelle Obama used in her speech. In this research, the data served in a form of table and description. This table below represents the finding that the researchers got from Michelle Obama's speech.

Table 1. Woman's language features

<b>Women's Language Features</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Lexical Hedges / Fillers	18	20%
Tag Questions	0	0%
Rising Intonation on Declaratives	1	1%
Empty Adjectives	0	0%
Precise Colour Terms	0	0%
Intensifiers	13	15%
Hypercorrect Grammar	0	0%
Superpolite Forms	0	0%
Avoidance of Strong Swear Words	0	0%
Emphatic Stress	57	64%

The table above shows the result of women's language features that is used by Michelle Obama in her speech to the Chinese students in Peking University. the total Features that was found is 89 items. Michelle Obama only used four of them, which are Lexical Hedges or Fillers (20%), Rising Intonations on Declaratives (1%), Intensifiers (15%), and Emphatic Stress (64%). For the rest of women's language features, such as avoidance of strong swear words, tag questions, precise color terms, super polite forms, hypercorrect grammar, and empty adjectives, the researchers didn't find it.

From the table, it can be seen that Michelle Obama tend to use emphatic stress in her speech. It shows from the percentage which is 64% or 57 items. The use of emphatic stress in her speech shows that she tried to convince the audience through her speech. She wanted the audience to believe what she said about studying abroad. The rarest features that was used by Michelle Obama was rising intonation on declaratives. It appears that she only used it once, which is 1%.

***The Functions of Women's Language Features Used by Michelle Obama***

In this part, the researchers present the result of the analysis about the functions of women's language features used by Michelle Obama in her speech to students of Peking University. In order to make it more reliable, the researchers show some examples of the utterance used by Michelle Obama based on each function.

***Lexical Hedges or Fillers***

Lexical hedges or fillers usually used to make the speech of the speaker weaker (Lakoff, 1975). In Michelle Obama's speech, the researchers found 18 items of Lexical hedges or fillers. It appeared that she used fillers more often in

the beginning of her speech. But after that, she could speak clearer after the first two minutes. There are one lexical hedges found from her speech, which are well and see, and the others are pause fillers such as [ee] and [ehm].

Michelle frequently used [ee] and [ehm] in the first two minutes of her speech. Based on Talbot's (2010) theory, he said that the use of hedges or fillers is to reduce the force of utterance. The example of hedges or fillers that was used by Michelle Obama were:

- a. [See], by learning each other's languages, and by showing such curiosity and respect for each other's cultures, [ee] Mr. Schafer and Ms. Zhu [ee] and all of you are building bridges of understanding that will lead to so much more.

In the example above, the use of [see] at the beginning of her utterance was used as a preface before she started to explain the reasons behind the importance of studying abroad, while the use of [ee] showed as a pause for her to think before she said something, as in Hirschberg (2010) stated.

### **Rising Intonation on Declaratives Statement**

According to Lakoff (1975), women tend to raise their voice at the end of her utterance. In Michelle Obama's speech, the researchers only found one example of this Features, as stated below:

That sounds fun but how will it be useful in my life? And believe me, I understand where these young people are coming from because I felt the same way back when I was in college.

From the example provided, the researchers seen it as a way to share her experience back then when she was in college. She had an opportunity to study abroad while she was from a working-class family. She wanted the audience to believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to study abroad. She used rising intonation in order to emphasize her experience.

### ***Intensifiers***

Intensifiers are one of women's language features that are used to strength a word after those intensifiers. The examples of intensifiers are so, just, really, such, quite, and very. In Michelle Obama's speech, the researchers found 13 items or 15% of intensifiers. The examples are:

- a. ... And all of you are building bridges of understanding that will lead to so much more.
- b. It's also about having real experience with the world beyond your borders -- experience with languages, cultures and societies very different from your own.

In the example, Michelle Obama used intensifier so and very to make it more believable so the audience believe what she said. In this case, Michelle Obama tried to deliver a strong message so the audience will think about it.

### ***Emphatic Stress***

As the data provided, the researchers found that the most used language features that Michelle Obama used in her speech was emphatic stress. According to Lakoff (1975), emphatic stress used as a tool to strengthen the most important word in someone's utterance. Back to the purpose of Michelle Obama's speech, which is to persuade many young people to study abroad, the researchers think

that the use of emphatic stress will help Michelle Obama to emphasize the message she wants her audience to listen to. The examples are:

- a. It is such a pleasure and an honor to be here with all of you at this great university
- b. ...because we believe that relationships between nations aren't just about relationships between governments or leaders --they're about relationships between people, particularly young people.

In example [a], the word that got an emphatic stress was great. In this case, Michelle Obama wanted to thank them who invited her to Peking University, which is a great university. In the other hand, the second example, Michelle Obama gave emphatic stress to some words. The first word is believe. Michelle Obama wanted to deliver a message that she believes on something and it's about a relationship between nations it's not all about government or leaders, but she and her husband also concerned about young people. The second word is people, particularly young people. It's almost the same with the first example. She wanted to emphasize her and her husband concerned about young people.

### **Conclusion**

The researchers have come to the end of the study. The purpose of this study is to analyze what women's language features that Michelle Obama used in her speech for college students in Peking University. The methodology that the researchers used was a descriptive qualitative method and the data was from the video of Michelle Obama's speech and the transcript. Based on the research, the researchers found out that Michelle Obama just used four out of ten women's language features in her speech, they are lexical hedges or fillers, rising intonation of declaratives, intensifiers, and emphatic stress. Michelle Obama didn't use the other six features. Based on the video and the discussion of the researchers, the reason why Michelle Obama didn't use all of the features because not all features are related to her speech, such as precise color terms, avoidance of strong swear words, etc. The most common use Features that Michelle Obama used was emphatic stress that showed she used in for 57 times or 64% of her speech. She used emphatic stress because she wanted to convince her audience about the benefits they got when they studying abroad. She wanted her audience to believe and take it seriously about what she said. In the other hand, she rarely used rising-intonation-on-declaratives-feature because the researchers only found one example of this features.

There are some women's language features that Michelle Obama didn't use, such as tag question, empty adjective, precise color terms, hypercorrect grammar, superpolite forms, and avoidance of strong swear words. Michelle Obama didn't use those features because it looks like it doesn't really have relation to the topic that she brought to her speech.

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