

Gender, linguistics, and leadership: A study of the language of coaches

Jill Brooks¹

York University, Toronto, Canada

Abstract: This study focuses on the differences in the linguistic features of male and female coaches when leading men's and women's teams. Over the course of four weeks, three coaches were observed while coaching men's and women's team practices. Utterances were coded as either encouragement or criticism, and were also given a rating of either enthusiastic, calm, stern, or aggressive. In this paper, I compare the number of encouragement and criticism utterances from the male and female coaches toward each team, as well as compare the number of utterances made toward each team that were either enthusiastic, calm, stern, or aggressive. The results suggest that the coaches' different linguistic styles are not innate but stem from conformity with language ideologies as a result of the two-cultures theory.

Keywords: language and gender; sports leadership; language ideologies

1 Introduction

The sports world has consistently been a male-dominated field. Though it has improved, the number of women participating in sports is still significantly lower than men (Pegoraro and Moore, 2022). A similar trend can be found in leadership positions. These roles have primarily been filled by men, and though there has been an increase in female leaders, the difference is still visible (MacDougall et al., 2022). Combine these two factors and even fewer examples of women in leadership positions are available (Canadian Women & Sport, 2020; Evans & Pfister, 2021).

Because of this disparity, I wanted to investigate two factors: whether there were linguistic differences between coaches based on their sex (for the purpose of this paper, "genders" will refer to male and female only); and whether the coaches' language would change based on the team's gender (a male coach addressing a women's team versus addressing a men's team).

Inspiration for this study was partly from personal experience and partly from watching the popular Netflix series *Cheer*. This documentary series follows a college level cheerleading team under the leadership of Monica Aldama. After the series aired, Aldama was met with much criticism, as many thought her coaching style was too tough (Steele, 2022). This reaction, along with being part of many sports teams and being privy to various coaching styles, ignited my interest in the topic.

This topic is significant as it explores the unconscious linguistic gender stereotypes that exist in our society. Some may think that women are incapable of being coaches because they use too much "women's language" (Lakoff, 1975). However, if they stray from this linguistic style, women may be subject to the same treatment as Aldama, and be told that they are too tough, even

¹ *Corresponding author: brooksj@yorku.ca*

though their style may be the same as a male coach. This may reflect the double-bind paradox, also discussed by Lakoff (1975).

After a brief literature review, the methodology of the paper will be outlined, followed by the results and discussion, as well as suggestions for further research.

2 Literature review

This section aims to explore what research already exists to help answer the question of whether male and female coaches speak differently when coaching teams of either sex. Do male coaches speak differently to men's teams versus women's teams? Do female coaches speak differently to women's teams versus men's teams?

Even though it is rarer to find women in leadership positions, some research has been done on the topic. However, there is virtually no research regarding the coaching styles of men versus women, and research regarding coaching a men's team versus a women's team is primarily from sources not considered scholarly. Because of this difficulty, the research I focused on was related to the general linguistic leadership styles of men and women. I also used research in the areas of women's language, the double-bind paradox, and the two-cultures theory. The blending of leadership styles of the genders with the language and gender theories listed, combined with the sports world, is where this paper focuses.

In Troemel-Ploetz's (1994) study, conversations with female managers' linguistic styles were analyzed and compared to men's. The results found that women had "a more egalitarian, more democratic and [...] more humane way of dealing with people" (Troemel-Ploetz, 1994, p. 209). This paper also described male leadership as "command-and-control" (Troemel-Ploetz, 1994, p. 209). My study will provide some insight into whether this holds true for people in leadership roles in sports.

Takano (2005) investigated the leadership styles of nine Japanese female executives. This paper directly addresses the societal expectations of women and how it conflicts with being a leader, a role that is typically considered masculine. It is worth noting that there are cultural differences between Japan and Canada that may make some aspects of this paper difficult to compare to the situation of coaching that is at hand. However, the conclusion of the paper is that the linguistic context is what is most important, rather than structures relating to power (Takano, 2005).

Lakoff (1975) famously popularized the concept of women's language, its features (including things like detailed colour discrimination, 'empty' adjectives, and hypercorrect grammar), and the ideologies associated with them. Based on these features, Lakoff discussed the double-bind paradox: if a woman speaks using women's language, she will not gain respect; however, if she uses men's language features, she will not be respected either (Lakoff, 1975). Seeing as leadership roles, and certainly sports leadership roles, are primarily filled by men, this double-bind is a significant factor in coaching.

The last theory to be discussed is the two-cultures theory, proposed by Maltz and Borker (1983). This theory suggests that men and women are from two different cultures based on how they are each raised as children. For examples, Ochs (1992) discussed how North American "baby talk" used by mothers creates an image of women being accommodating to the needs of the child, and therefore socializes the child to perceive women as accommodating more generally. Though this observation is general, it provides an example of how children may be socialized to perceive

each sex a certain way. The result of these different cultures is miscommunication within conversation because different cultures lead to different goals and approaches within a conversation. I will explore how this theory connects with coaching styles in the discussion section of this paper.

3 Methodology

Three coaches (one female, two male) were observed over the course of four weeks. These coaches oversaw the same two teams: men’s and women’s intramural volleyball at a large, urban university in Toronto, Canada. All three of the coaches were working simultaneously to coach both the men’s and women’s teams. Coaches were observed for a total of two hours a week (one hour for the men’s team, one hour for the women’s team), for an overall total of eight hours. Consent was received from each of the coaches under the pretense of studying ‘teamwork dynamics.’ The true nature of the study could not be disclosed to them as it would corrupt the linguistic data.

For the purpose of this paper, the coaches will be referred to as Coach M (for the male coaches) or Coach F (for the female coach), and the teams as Team M (men’s) or Team W (women’s). The data for Coach M combines the data from both male coaches. All coaches were present and active for the observance times.

The coaches’ utterances of encouragement (“Good!”) and criticism (“Higher!”) were recorded in writing. No other utterances besides encouragement and criticism were recorded for the sake of organization, and because these utterances represent the extreme ends of one spectrum. All other utterances were ignored.

Each utterance was coded for one of four delivery methods: *enthusiastic*, *calm*, *stern*, and *aggressive*. These methods were based on two features: suprasegmental aspects of speech such as intonation, duration, and volume; as well as body language (eye contact, focus of the coach, and any additional gestures such as clapping, pointing, etc.). Table 1 outlines some of the possible suprasegmental features and body language of each delivery method. It is important to note that these categorizations are not completely exclusive; there are cases where suprasegmentals or body language of one category may have been present in an utterance labeled as a different category. This is a difficult distinction that was made by the researcher in the moment of collection based on the context. For example, if a player made a mistake and the coach was visibly annoyed or amused afterward helped to inform a categorization of *calm* or *stern*.

Table 1
Suprasegmental Parameters for Code Delivery Method

	Enthusiastic	Calm	Stern	Aggressive
Suprasegmentals	High pitch	Average volume	Loud	Loud
	Vowel extension	Steady duration		Fast
Body language	Clapping	Focus	Direct focus	Wide eyes
	Smiling	Relaxed face/body	Stern facial expression	Expansive gestures

4 Results

As can be seen in Table 2, the results for the utterances of criticism and encouragement did not vary between Coach M and F when they were coaching either team. The largest difference comes instead when considering the total number of utterances from both coaches, regardless of them being criticisms or encouragements. Team M received a total of 23 utterances, whereas Team F received 42 – almost double the number of utterances.

The results for delivery methods can be seen in Table 3 and Table 4. The spread across all four delivery methods was unremarkable: it stayed relatively similar across coaches and teams. The notable difference is similar to that of utterances or encouragement in that it is simply in the number of utterances.

5 Discussion

As mentioned above, the results between utterances of criticism and encouragement and delivery methods of these utterances appeared to be similar across coaches and teams. Further research will need to be conducted on why this data revealed no significant difference in terms of utterances of criticism and encouragement and delivery methods. There is the possibility that part of this relativity even spread of data across categories is the level of play. Though these teams are playing at a university level, they are not varsity teams (the highest level of play that takes place between universities). This may influence the way the coaches speak to their teams, as the stakes are much lower. I would expect a varsity team coach to have more instances of criticism and perhaps more delivery methods of stern and aggressive, though this is an anecdotal assumption that would need to be supported by further research,

Table 2

Total Utterances of Criticism and Encouragement

Team	Coach M		Coach F	
	Criticism	Encouragement	Criticism	Encouragement
Team M	8	7	4	4
Team W	12	8	11	11

Table 3

Delivery Method of Coach M to Teams M and W

Team	Coach M			
	Enthusiastic	Calm	Stern	Aggressive
Team M	4	7	3	1
Team W	5	8	6	1

Table 4

Delivery Method of Coach F to Teams M and W

Team	Coach F			
	Enthusiastic	Calm	Stern	Aggressive
Team M	2	5	1	0
Team W	5	12	5	0

GENDER, LINGUISTICS, AND LEADERSHIP

The main difference between these factors was the number of utterances, with Team F receiving almost double the number of utterances versus Team M. Thus, the results of this study have many possible interpretations. I will discuss each of these interpretations from the theoretical lenses introduced in the literature review.

One of the most prominent theories in language and gender is the two-cultures theory (Maltz & Borker, 1983). This theory puts forth that men and women grow up in separate ‘cultures’ and therefore end up with communication styles that contrast. Furthermore, incidents of miscommunication can therefore be attributed to cross-cultural differences (Maltz & Borker, 1983). The two-cultures theory may contribute to why the number of utterances was significant between the teams.

Based on the theoretical perspective of language style as audience design suggested by Bell (1984), I argue that the coaches in this study are changing their language style to accommodate their audiences – a men’s team versus a women’s team. Their language style is influenced by the two-cultures theory, which inspires them to either adapt to the team they are coaching or feel more comfortable to speak ‘normally’ with the team they are coaching.

If men and women are raised within different social worlds and this results in a change in their communication, it can be argued that they are raised with awareness to the fact that they communicate differently. A man is going to be aware that the way that he speaks with his male friends is different from how he speaks with women in his life, and vice versa. It should be noted that this awareness is likely not a detailed, in-depth metalinguistic awareness where people have observed their every linguistic feature when speaking with different genders. It is more that they are simply aware; there is some difference, and it can be acknowledged but not particularly described.

If there is some level of awareness, there can also be adaptation. Though Maltz and Borker (1983) discussed miscommunication, it is not always the case that everything a man says is misunderstood by a woman. There are many conversational moments that are successful, and this is perhaps because of the subconscious adaptation of speech between the parties. A man adjusts his language to match what he perceives to be more on par with the language of a woman, and vice versa.

Therefore, the coaches in this study may have adjusted their language patterns when speaking to the men’s team and the women’s team to match what they perceive to be more appropriate. In this case, aligning themselves with the stereotype of women speaking more than men. The coaches spoke more to the women to align with their concept of how women communicate and spoke less to the men to align with their concept of men’s communication. Because the coaches are not exempt from the two-cultures theory, it is also possible that Coach F in particular was subscribing to this theory by speaking more to the women’s team. If it is the case that women are socialized to speak more, then she would feel more comfortable doing so with the women’s team versus the men’s team. This is also true in the case of Coach M, both of whom would feel less pressure to speak more when coaching the men’s team.

These concepts come from this idea of men and women having two separate cultures. Although the utterances the coaches made were very similar (in the words used and in the method of delivery) and therefore somewhat contradicts the two-cultures theory, their perception of the communication styles of men and women have influenced how they speak to each team, in terms of the number of utterances. Speaking a lot is a stereotypical trait of women (and this trait has been

learned by the coaches as a result of being raised in two separate cultures) and so the coaches engage in this trait to bond with their team.

There is also the prevailing sports theory that women are more coachable than men (Jansen, 2008). It is often said in sports that the respect of a men's team needs to be earned, or that engaging in too much speaking may be perceived as a feminine feature of speech. It does not support the image of a strong coach: stoic, standing on the sidelines, tough, and only saying what needs to be said. This connects to gender in that this linguistic performativity of a strong coach is not transferable between genders. Coach Monica Aldama shares these qualities, as she does not speak a lot, is strict with her athletes, and her criticisms are often lengthier than her compliments. Though she shares these qualities with many notable coaches (Pumerantz, 2012), she does not receive the same recognition. This touches on the double-bind paradox, as discussed by Lakoff (1975). It could also be the case that the coaches in this study are buying into this idea as well – speaking less to the men's team creates space and a sense of separation. It creates a feeling of 'sizing each other up' that may speak to this idea that men's team's respect needs to be earned. Similarly, if the coaches are operating under the assumption that women's teams are more coachable, they would feel less pressure not to speak and engage with the team without feeling like they will lose respect. This could be another motivation for the coaches in this study to speak less when addressing the men's team: they want to gain the respect of their players. Speaking too much may indicate lack of authority or powerlessness (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980), and if the respect of the men's team must be earned, engaging in this linguistic behaviour may risk losing that chance.

Importantly, both of the above interpretations rely on perception. Society has social constructions of gender and ideologies that go with them (Cameron, 2014). Even though there is awareness of these ideologies, and some may disagree with them, their power and influence are undeniable. The coaches in this study subscribe to these ideologies in order to present themselves in what they consider to be the most effective way for each team.

6 Conclusion and further research

This paper examined the coaching styles of male and female coaches when leading men's and women's teams. The results showed little difference in the amount of criticism or encouragement across coaches and teams. There was also no difference in the delivery method of the coaches across teams. There was, however, a significant difference in the number of utterances said to Team W versus Team M, across both coaches. This can be attributed to the two-cultures theory: Coach M and Coach F were raised in different social worlds and as a result have an awareness of the communication styles of the genders. This awareness led them to adjust their speech in order to build rapport with their teams by speaking less to Team M and more to Team W, aligning their linguistic behaviours with the stereotypical linguistic traits of each gender.

From a different perspective, the assumption that women's teams are more coachable than men's resulted in the coaches compensating for this difference by speaking less to Team M in an effort to exude authority and gain respect. The coaches felt that Team W would be more receptive to their input due to this assumption and so were free with their utterances.

Further research needs to be done into the perception of coaches. This paper focused on the actual utterances and behaviours of coaches, but it did not substantially explore how coaches of each gender are perceived by their teams nor others in the sports community. Monica Aldama is perceived as too tough of a coach – is this because of her gender, or because she is genuinely a tough coach? This is the next area of research for language and gender in sports leadership.

The world of sports is a unique area of study as it is a condensed, often hyper-masculine environment. Research around the perception of women in sports leadership, women's presences in these settings, and how masculinity is indexed (or not indexed enough by the standards of those involved), and the linguistic manifestations of these categories would be an ideal next line of research.

References

- Bell, A. (1984). Language style as audience design. *Language in Society*, 13(2), 145–204.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S004740450001037X>
- Cameron, D. (2014) Gender and language ideologies. In S. Ehrlich, M. Meyerhoff, & J. Holmes (Eds.), *The handbook of language, gender and sexuality* (pp. 281-296). Wiley & Sons.
- Canadian Women & Sport. (2020, March 23). *Women in sport leadership snapshots*.
<https://womenandsport.ca/resources/research-insights/leadership-snapshot/>
- Evans, A. B., & Pfister, G. U. (2021). Women in sports leadership: A systematic narrative review. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(3), 317–342.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220911842>
- Jansen, J. (2008, August 3). *SPECIAL REPORT: Discover the 8 differences between coaching men and women - part 1*. Championship Coaches Network.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20221126064401/https://www.championshipcoachesnetwork.com/public/375.cfm>
- Lakoff, R. T. (1975). *Language and woman's place*. Harper & Row.
- MacDougall, A., Valley, J. M., Jeffrey, J. (2022, October 13). *Report: 2022 diversity disclosure practices – diversity and leadership at Canadian public companies*. Osler.
<https://www.osler.com/en/resources/governance/2022/report-2022-diversity-disclosure-practices-diversity-and-leadership-at-canadian-public-companies>
- Maltz, D. N., & Borker, R. A. (1983). A cultural approach to male–female miscommunication. In J. J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity* (pp. 196–216). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620836.013>
- O'Barr, W. & Atkins, B. (1980). 'Women's language' or 'powerless language'? In S. McConnel-Ginet, R. Borker, & N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and language in literature and society* (pp. 93-110). Praeger.
- Ochs, E. (1992). Indexing Gender. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp. 335–358). Cambridge University Press.
- Pegoraro, A., & Moore, E. (2022, April 22). *Signals versus noise: Gender equity in Canadian sport*. Sport Information Resource Centre. <https://sirc.ca/articles/signals-versus-noise/>
- Pumerantz, Z. (2012). *The 50 greatest coaches of all time*. B/R.
<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1277689-the-50-greatest-coaches-of-all-time>
- Steele, D. (2022, January 31). *Cheer: Monica Aldama's age & why she's criticized for being too tough*. ScreenRant.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20220414031252/https://screenrant.com/cheer-monica-aldama-age-why-criticized-being-tough/>
- Troemel-Ploetz, S. (1994). "Let me put it this way, John": Conversational strategies of women in leadership positions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 22(2), 199–209.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(94\)90067-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(94)90067-1)