

## Women's Language Features of an Ancient Chinese Female Warrior Disguised as a Male in “*Mulan*”

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### Article History:

Received: 03 September 2022

Revised: 18 September 2022

Accepted: 19 September 2022

**Keywords:** *Women,  
Language, Feature, Function,  
Movie*

**Abstract:** *The main purpose of this study was to find out and explain the functions of women's language features that are used by Mulan in the movie. This study applied qualitative and descriptive methods while the primary data were taken from the utterances said by the main character in the movie. The method that was used to collect the data was the documentation method through the note-taking technique. The data analysis was analyzed using the theory proposed by Lakoff in 1975, supported by the theory by Holmes in 2013. The result of this study showed that there are five out of ten features found in the character utterances: lexical hedges or fillers, super polite forms, hypercorrect grammar, emotional emphasis, and empty adjectives. The character mostly uses the women's language features in her utterances as a hedging device rather than boosting device. She uses it as a symbol of her self-expression regarding her hesitation, politeness, and her emotions throughout the movie.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is a set of items that consists of sounds, words, or symbols that humans use to express their feelings and thoughts. Oftentimes, the use of language most likely creates rather than reflects meanings and interpretations. Linguistics might be defined as the scientific study of language (Lyons, 1981). Sociolinguistics as an empirical science derived from two disciplines; sociology and linguistics, concerns itself with examining language use with social features such as gender and the context in which it is uttered.

Research on gender and language traditionally has been divided into two types; the study of how gender is represented in the language or the form of language, and the study of how men and women use language or the function of language (Speer, 2005). Lakoff initially described nine linguistic features that comprise women's language which in general differ from men's. Lakoff argued that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways; in the way they are taught to use language and, in the way, general language use treats them.

Women often get judged for their choice of language and are expected to be feminine by speaking politely and being attentive. They go through social inequity by being ranked in a lower position and will always be an object of criticism. If one refuses to talk like the role she is supposed to play, she will be ridiculed and marked as unfeminine, while if she plays along, she will be ridiculed and judged as stupid. They were given two options, to be less than a woman or less than

a human.

Nakamura (2014:1) added that numerous etiquette books on feminine speech are published every year preaching to women that they can be beautiful, attractive, and loved by speaking polite, soft, feminine women's language. This showed how much society dictates women to behave and speak with a particular attitude. Regarding this matter, women are likely to speak with uncertainty and lack confidence.

Women's language including its features is very interesting to be studied as it is connected with a gender-biased society. The use of women's language tends to be associated as a sign of "weakness". However, Holmes (2013:308) in contrast argued that women are facilitative and supportive conversationalists, rather than unconfident, tentative talkers. Many of the features are considered positive politeness devices for expressing solidarity.

While the use of women's language is still being argued about and observed today, the cycle of women's and men's language variations in patterns of interactions and communicative style carry on. Those patterns are "being taught" through socialization, and they emerge as a result of gender-segregated play during childhood. "Gender" as a term differs from "sex" in being about socially-expected characteristics rather than biology. Possessing different genitalia is about biological factors, but seeing this as leading to certain forms of behavior is about gender (Goddard and Patterson, 2000).

The relationship between language, gender, and culture is very fundamental, as it can shift one perspective to another. A movie entitled *Mulan* was chosen to be analyzed. The original version of *Mulan* is published around the sixth century A.D., but the portrayal of inequality is relevant until today.

Mulan is obliged to the four womanly virtues of *Confucianism*; chastity and fidelity, womanly words, womanly bearing, and womanly works, wherein one ought to behave modestly, speak softly, dress up prettily, and do their women's work diligently (Sotomayor). Mulan in reverse is the total opposite of how "a woman should be". She chooses to step to take the place of her ailing father and disguised as a male under the name of Hua Jun when the emperor issues a decree that one man per family must serve in the Imperial Army.

During the time, the language is rather polite as the variety found in modern language today has not been discovered yet. Gender norms are not as fluid as nowadays, and when an individual crosses the boundaries, they will be viewed as an abomination and shame, much to the family. This study was intended to find out and analyze whether Mulan still carries on the language features of a woman, even when she disguised as a man and joined the army.

The movie gives a clear picture of how females and males have to adjust and be responsible for their assigned roles in society. Though time has changed, gender imbalances exist. Various things nowadays adapt to pre-existing stereotypes, and help to perpetuate them.

Itmeizeh and Ma'ayeh (2017) investigated female gender roles and stereotypes that were portrayed in *Disney* movies and what type of values are reflected by the women's language features based on the theory proposed by Lakoff in 1975. Result findings and analysis revealed that as time passed, in more recent movies stereotypes and gender depiction are still visible yet have changed.

Mulan has to suppress her abilities and pretend to be "a stereotype woman" to be viewed as normal. If one chooses to pursue her passion and desire that is completely irrelevant or unsuitable, she will be exiled and viewed as odd as she did not fit in with the role that was given to her since birth.

Mulan, in this case, chooses to go and cross-dress as a man to get more freedom and fortunately succeeded in bringing back the family honor. This study focused on the analysis of

women's language features occurrence in Mulan's utterances as a woman as well as "a man" when she is disguised in the army, and determined the function of each feature.

## METHODS

The data source in this study is a movie entitled *Mulan*. The movie premiered on March 9, 2020. Originally, it was scheduled to be released widely later that month, but then canceled and being delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It finally premiered on September 4, 2020, on the *Disney+* platform with a premium fee, along with the traditional theatrical release in countries where theatres have reopened.

The primary data is the women's language features used by Mulan, the main character in the movie. Mulan is a fictional woman warrior who lived in the Chinese Northern and Southern dynasties era, around the fourth to sixth century A.D. During the time, patriarchy runs strong, and the character lives in a particular society with a specific culture where each family put emphasis and deep sentiment on manners and language use, especially upon women. This movie is interesting to be analyzed since Mulan, the main character of the movie will undergo an experience of disguising herself as a male and few features of women's language were found during the journey. This study intended to find out particular linguistic features of a woman during her time as a woman and disguised as the opposite sex.

The data in this study are collected by using documentation methods. The instrument that is used to collect the data is a checklist, supported by a note-taking technique. The procedures employed in doing the process of collecting data were the movie and its script was being downloaded first, observing the movie to find the language used by the main character Mulan by watching and listening, transcribing the utterances, then observing again by reading the utterances of the main character in the movie accurately to find out and classify which one of the languages uses that contain women's language features. The data then were sorted through note-taking by rewriting the selected data and ordering it into a list.

The collected data were analyzed by qualitative method. The data which contain women's language features were classified to find out women's language features that are used by Mulan based on the theory proposed by Lakoff (1975). Furthermore, the data were identified to analyze the functions of women's language features which are used by Mulan based on the perspective carried out by Lakoff (1975) supported by Holmes (2013) who based her statement on Lakoff's theory. This study also uses the theory of social factors proposed by Holmes (2013) to provide a clear picture of analyzing the function of the language features.

The descriptive method was applied in presenting the data. Descriptive means the data was presented by explaining it in words or sentences. The method is chosen as it was suitable to describe the data and the analysis in this study to make a clear explanation. The technique of presenting data was by narrative and elaborating the women's language features and their functions that were found in the language used by the Mulan character in the movie.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to Lakoff (1975), women's language is the language that contains several lexical items differences between women and men which indicate the characteristic of how women use language in general. Based on the analysis, the language features used by Mulan are lexical hedges, super polite forms, hypercorrect grammar, emotional emphasis, and empty adjectives. Each feature will be discussed below.

- 1) Lexical hedges or fillers

Hedges or fillers are considered as words that convey the sense that the speaker is uncertain about what he or she is saying; or cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement (Lakoff, 1975). Hedges qualifies statements with non-absolute language, while fillers refer to some words with no meanings that the majority of women use in their conversation. Both of them can be considered pause-shaped phrases

Linguistic features **I think** and **you know** considered as lexical hedges or fillers in conversation [1] occurred at home between Mulan, her father Hua Zhou, and her mother Hua Li. It is considered an informal conversation and the topic of conversation is Mulan wants to recount her experience of seeing two rabbits running side by side. She just come back to her house after her little adventure with her horse in the prairie. When she arrived at her family's dining table, she found her father, mother, and sister sitting and eating together for lunch there. Mulan then excitedly approach them.

Conversation [1]

**Mulan** : Black Wind and I rode alongside two rabbits running side by side. **I think** one was a male and one was a female. But **you know**, we can't really tell when they are running that fast. When I go riding tomorrow, I'll try to find them again. Maybe they're still there

**Hua Li** : We have excellent news. The Matchmaker has found you an auspicious match

**Hua Zhou** : Yes, Mulan. It is decided. Come and sit down. It is what is best for our family

**Mulan** : Yes. It is best. I would bring honor to us all

In conversation [1], Mulan uses those hedges or fillers **I think** and **you know** to show her lack of confidence or uncertainty on the matter of what she just talked about, as he is unable to vouch for the accuracy of her statement regarding the gender of the rabbit. Since the rabbits running very fast, Mulan can't tell what gender it is as she said that she 'thinks' one was a male and one was a female, and therefore she will try to find them again when she goes riding tomorrow.

It can be concluded that her expression of using lexical hedges as hedging devices is to weaken her statement and her prediction or her guess about the rabbits and at the same time because, at that moment, she is talking to both of her parents. Her parent naturally possesses higher roles and rank than her socially, and especially in the culture and the norm of their society at that time, a woman must be polite and 'soft' when she talks to figures who are older than her.

## 2) Super polite forms

Super polite forms are the words that may be similar to a request in the same sense of polite command, in that it does not overtly require obedience, but rather suggests something be done as a favor to the speaker (Lakoff, 1975).

Linguistic features **I would rather** considered as super polite forms in conversation [2] occurred post-war between Mulan, her friend (Cricket), her sergeant (Sergeant Qiang), and her commander (Commander Tung). It is considered a formal conversation and the topic of conversation is Mulan wanted to be executed when the army found out about her true identity. During the first attack, all of the armies are safe and sound, thanks to the help and effort of Mulan. But at the same time, their opponent, a woman who can transform into a hawk because of her strong *chi*, recognizes that underneath it all, Mulan is a woman just like her. She blows up Mulan's cover until Mulan got no choice but to confess to others and especially her sergeant and commander that she has been hiding her true identity all along.

Conversation [2]

**Mulan** : I'm Hua Mulan. Forgive me

**Cricket** : She's a girl?

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- Commander Tung** : You're an imposter. You betrayed the regiment. You brought disgrace to the Hua family
- Mulan** : Commander
- Commander Tung** : Your deceit is my shame
- Sergeant Qiang** : Commander, what is the punishment to this imposter?
- Commander Tung** : Expulsion
- Mulan** : **I would rather** be executed
- Sergeant Qiang** : From this moment forward, you are expelled from the emperor imperial army
- Commander Tung** : If you show your face again, your wish to be executed will be granted

In conversation [2], Mulan uses those super polite forms **I would rather** to show her request since Mulan already knows that is impossible to earn forgiveness from her commander, and at the same time know that she will be expelled from the army and thus have to be back to her village with shame and dishonor for her and her family. She asks to be executed, and if it is given, it would be a favor to her, since she thinks she should die rather than bring such embarrassment to her family.

### 3) Hypercorrect grammar

Generally, women used hypercorrect grammar to be viewed as being the preservers of literacy and culture, as women are not supposed to talk tough (Lakoff, 1975).

Linguistic features **thank you** considered as hypercorrect grammar in conversation [3] occurred at the Madam Matchmaker's house between Mulan and Madam Matchmaker. It is considered a formal conversation and the topic of conversation is Madam Matchmaker saw Mulan doing something odd. During the matchmaking process, The Madam Matchmaker notices something unusual from the way Mulan inappropriately placed the teapot set, then proceeds to ask if there is something wrong. Since it is her duty, responsibility, and job to ensure that Mulan successfully is matched with the other's family, Madam Matchmaker were worried when she encounters something odd in Mulan. At that moment, tradition, culture, and manner were strongly placed upon the sons and especially daughters of the family. Mulan then counters the Madam Matchmaker's question with a statement that seems like aimed to make Madam Matchmaker calmer with a closed sentence.

Conversation [3]

- Madam Matchmaker** : Quiet, composed, graceful, elegant, poised, polite. These are the qualities we see in a good wife. These are the qualities we see in Mulan. When a wife serves her husband, she must be silent. She must be invisible. She must be...is something wrong?
- Mulan** : No, Madam Matchmaker. **Thank you**

In conversation [3], Mulan uses the hypercorrect grammar **thank you** to display such a literate and well-mannered woman in her. Mulan used hypercorrect grammar as she knows she has to be such a polite and well-mannered woman in front of her mother and her soon-to-be mother-in-law to earn the position as a wife to a man and thus bring great honor to her family.

### 4) Emotional emphasis

Women used emotional emphasis as another way of expressing uncertainty with their self-expression, though this statement may appear contradictory; emphasis, if anything, seems to strengthen an utterance (Lakoff, 1975).

Linguistic features **starving** and **fiercest** are considered as an emotional emphasis in conversation [4] occurred at the Madam Matchmaker's house between Mulan, her mother Hua Li,



her father Hua Zhou, and her sister Hua Xiu. It is considered an informal conversation and the topic of conversation is Mulan's protest and complaint about the preparation before the matchmaking process. Mulan and her family are on the way to the matchmaker's house. Previously, she has to go through a few preparations process to look more beautiful, elegant, and desirable according to the social norms back then. That includes a bold, layered, and heavy make-up with many various colors, as well as the clothes and hair that need special treatment and steps to look certain ways. The whole process is indeed very complicated, exhausting, and torturing for Mulan.

Conversation [4]

**Hua Zhou** : I'm truly blessed to be in the presence of such enchanting women. I have no doubt today will be a momentous day for the Hua family

**Hua Li** : Never mind that. We must be on time

**Mulan** : I'm **starving**

**Hua Li** : I already told you, cannot eat. It will ruin your makeup

**Mulan** : The **fiercest** winter storm cannot destroy this makeup. Xiu, look at my face. What's on my feeling?

**Hua Xiu** : I have no idea

**Mulan** : Exactly. This is my sad face. This is my curious face. And now I'm confused

In conversation [4], Mulan uses those emotional emphasis on **starving** and **fiercest** to show her lack of confidence since she protests and complaint to her mother who possesses and played a higher role but at the same time strengthens the meaning of her expression which is indeed very hungry and she knows that nothing can destroy the make-up that is being put into her face. She hates the idea of being caught in the middle of being matched to someone who she didn't even ever meet yet, since it already causes a lot of discomfort for her personally.

#### 5) Empty adjectives

Empty adjectives may be used in which the hedge mitigates the possible unfriendliness or unkindness of a statement, that is, where it is used for the sake of politeness (Lakoff, 1975).

Linguistic features **best** considered as empty adjectives in conversation [5] occurred at home between Mulan, her father Hua Zhou, and her mother Hua Li. It is considered an informal conversation and the topic of conversation is Mulan discovering that she will be matched to someone. She just arrived at her house, and as she washes her hands before joining her family at the table to have lunch, her parents; Hua Li and Hua Zhou told Mulan that they have 'excellent news' for her. Hua Li told her that a matchmaker has found a suitable match and family for her. Hua Zhou furthermore added that it is; the whole setup and decision, is already decided without even needing an input, opinion, or anything from her. Her parents display an unshakeable higher rank and power over their children, especially a daughter, things which are very common at that time. They just told her that it is what is best for their family, which means it is settled, and it is implied that the decision is not just about Mulan, but about her whole family's sake; reputation, honor, and dignity in the eyes of society.

Conversation [5]

**Hua Li** : We have excellent news. The Matchmaker has found you an auspicious match

**Hua Zhou** : Yes, Mulan. It is decided. Come and sit down. It is what is best for our family

**Mulan** : Yes. **It is best**. I would bring honor to us all

In conversation [5], Mulan uses those empty adjectives **best** to mitigate the tension between her and her parents for the sake of politeness. Her statement indicates how complicated it is for her to accept that decision but at the same time, she couldn't reject it since it is her parents' demand. When Mulan just got the news that she will be matched with someone she

didn't even know about, she is not happy since it is not what her heart truly passionate about. She tries to be okay with that and went along with her parents' plan because deep down she knows it is what is best according to her parents and she will be considered normal once she acts and goes through what most women do in society at that time. She also knew that no matter what happens, what she said, nothing could change what her parents already decided, as it will considered rude behavior to not submit to her parents' will.

## CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to find out and explain which types of women's language features used by the main character in a movie entitled *Mulan* (2020) based on a theory proposed by Lakoff (1975). The findings show that there are five out of ten features found in the character utterances, they are; lexical hedges or fillers, super polite forms, hypercorrect grammar, emotional emphasis, and empty adjectives. The features that were found when she was in her true form as a woman were lexical hedges or fillers, hypercorrect grammar, emotional emphasis, and empty adjectives. Meanwhile, the features that were found when she was disguised as a male were lexical hedges or fillers, super polite forms, and emotional emphasis.

The character mostly uses the women's language features in her utterances as a hedging device rather than boosting device. She uses it as a symbol of her self-expression regarding her hesitation, politeness, and her emotions throughout the movie. It can be concluded as well that considering the character's personality, traits, and experiences, the reason why she doesn't use women's language features is not that she is a 'less' woman, but most likely because it isn't who she thinks she truly is, at least based on society's lens of view of women. The character is a woman, but her carefree personality, trait, and experiences of being viewed as weird, different, and even having to be disguised as the opposite gender in result make her more open to change and express herself freely, even with the confusion and hesitant feelings that still existed.

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