



Female Linguistic Differences Based  
on the Addressee's Gender in Fox News  
Coverage

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# Female Linguistic Differences Based on the Addressee's Gender in Fox News Coverage

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**Abstract:** Journalism outlets provide coverage of Capitol Hill's endeavors, but the passion and tension within the political atmosphere can elicit subconscious bias in treatment of interviewed parties. This study selects three female anchors' respective July 12, 2018 Fox News broadcasts and analyzes their gender-isolating tendencies to offer mitigative or assertive language when engaging with male versus female interviewees. The data collected for the three anchors followed a trend of utilizing authoritative forms of language towards women and deferring with reservation towards men. These anchors displayed selective choices in the visibility of expressing dissent with significantly more interruptions of female guests and a greater use of hedges towards male guests. When accounting for the political parties of the interviewees, the anchors offered more deference to Democratic male guests than female Republican guests or female Fox News correspondents. These findings indicated a sociolinguistic difference which could possibly indicate a denial of equal opportunity to female interviewees on news broadcasts.

**Keywords:** *Sociolinguistics, Gender Bias, Fox News, Female Anchors, Language Usage*

## Introduction

While the purpose of news has been to inform the public, many television news outlets now feature political commentary broadcasts, which often diverge from the ideal objective news source. Similar to politicians, political commentators have a tremendous presence in society by providing their analytic opinion on the latest actions of the government. Anchors, the leading members in the commentating field, have the responsibility of setting the tone of their shows, moderating conversations with panelists, and creating an agenda by focusing on certain issues. By deviating from the objective and balanced presentation of news, more focus goes to opinion and personal belief.

Since political commentating is a male-dominated field, female anchors have to defy Western societal expectations and stereotypes of polite, passive women due to the confrontational nature of their job. Yet, social approval plays a critical role in determining which female anchors keep their rank — promotions and demotions are determined by viewer ratings and level of rapport with network executives. If society places value on these traditional gendered characteristics, females could be expected to possess assertiveness while being held to an additional, paradoxical evaluation of upholding feminine grace and deference to men. The possibility arises that as a result of having these paradoxical expectations ingrained within them, female anchors subconsciously tone down their passion and vigor when conversing with male guests versus female guests.

Attempts to neutralize male-favored occupation titles (e.g., changing “policeman” to “police officer”) have helped raise rates of female employment in such fields. But these language changes have failed to dispel the stereotypes society has traditionally associated with many professions (Sczesny et al., 2016). Sczesny et al. note that while active linguistic interventions have mitigated divisive stereotypes, inequalities remain with social connotations in employment. Despite not being perfect, these intervention efforts have proven fruitful in the news profession as evidenced by a 2014 finding that 37.2% of American newsroom employees were women (Steiner, 2017). With mixed feelings of optimism

and a hint of bitterness, Steiner (2017) remarks, "Women are no longer confined to a woman's ghetto ... if they infiltrate the newsroom" (p. 14). Her comment indicates wariness; although female journalism employment continues to rise, as long as disadvantageous misconceptions about women remain present, females may continue to feel inadequate and insecure with regard to employment.

Researchers have attempted to debunk negative stereotypes related to women's linguistic methods. One study regarding Facebook users' language was able to dispel the stereotype that in using friendlier language, women automatically lacked assertive skills (Park et al., 2016). Analyzing data from more than 15,000 Facebook users, the Park et al. study utilized an algorithm that assigned psychological and emotional values to the words most commonly used by each gender. This report found that though women more frequently utilized sympathetic and relational language, there were no significant divergences between men and women in assertiveness abilities. A different research study surveying Swiss nationals found when participants did not know the speaker's gender, they interpreted women's comments as more credible than men's; however, when the participants were able to see the speakers, the participants rated male newscasters higher in credibility than female newscasters (Weibel et al., 2008). With a transparent drift in standards depending on gender, females could expect to be evaluated more harshly than their male peers. These preconceived perceptions of females' abilities have hindered advancement in their careers as seen in the pattern of male employees rating female managers consistently lower than their male counterparts (Szymanska & Rubin, 2018). People's perceptions of women's abilities show that women compete in a different playing field for the same employment opportunities, and analysis determining linguistic patterns of successful women can shed light on what society appreciates about women's contributions.

Gendered stereotypes can disadvantage women in attaining leadership roles by causing society to unconsciously or consciously marginalize their abilities. How do these stereotypes affect women and how they communicate with each gender in

their work environment? It is possible that female anchors change their language when conversing with male guests versus female guests. In regard to male guests, it is hypothesized that the anchor would yield in demeanor through noticeable usage of hedges and a less confrontational solicitation of response. When interacting with female guests, the anchor would act more comfortably by making comments with minimal hedges and directly soliciting feedback with fewer pauses. This study intends to address the validity of these claims and how such a defense mechanism affects an anchor's ability to thoroughly cross-examine guests.

## Methods

This study analyzed the televised broadcasts of Fox News' *Outnumbered Overtime*, *Fox News at Night*, and *The Ingraham Angle*, which are anchored by Harris Faulkner (age 52), Shannon Bream (age 47), and Laura Ingraham (age 55) respectively. The broadcast date used was July 12, 2018, and all three shows focused primarily on the Congressional investigation regarding FBI Agent Peter Strzok's potential targeting of the Republican candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 United States presidential election. By focusing on female anchors who are similar in age and under the same managing news network, the research setting involved a more controlled and homogeneous region of topics and coverage, which helped keep confounding variables under control.

To objectively break down how language might differ depending on the guest's gender, the study focused on analyzing use of hedges, self-revisions, and interruptions or overlapping. Park et al. (2016) presented psycholinguistic findings of women demonstrating assertiveness despite utilizing relational language. However, the scope of the study was limited to Facebook, an online social media network that offers a casual environment for conversation. By observing the use of interpersonal courtesies like hedges or conversational turn-taking in the professional news environment, this research collected pooled results by addressee gender to understand how female anchors balanced deference and assertiveness when interviewing guests.

During the broadcast viewing, one segment of observation was an indication of anchor directness when soliciting response and feedback from the guests. This was observed through the concision and clarity of statements made by the anchors before the guests began to talk. The data collection served to determine if the anchor's frequency of hedges and pauses noticeably increased when talking to a male guest versus a female guest. This study tracked instances of authoritative language as overlapping or interruptions, direct imperatives, and confrontations without otherwise offering mitigation. An example of mitigation was if an anchor made a harsh comment and followed it with an attempt to soothe the atmosphere through a lighter-hearted joke or compliment. Additionally, instances of deferring language were considered to be the use of hedges, tag questions, or pauses followed by a rise in volume and rushed speed, indicating a self-revision. The threshold for pauses was set at 0.5 seconds, and there had to be a rushed follow-up to fulfill the criteria for a self-revision.

The results were tagged according to the guest's gender, political affiliation, and whether an instance of deferral or authority from the anchor was noted. Any motivating factors, including gender, political orientation, and intensity of debate, had an influence on the final weighting of results. For example, consistent attempts to assert authority around female Fox News contributors provided stronger information on the sole impact of gender compared to assertiveness around female Democratic constituents, which could be attributed to political disagreement. While keeping guests' political tendencies and their possible influence over an anchor's demeanor in mind, this study tried to strengthen the data and findings by differentiating results which could not be ignored due to political compounding variables. An example of considering the pooled effect of gender and political affiliation was if the female news anchor used more hedges towards a Democratic male strategist as opposed to a Democratic female strategist.

## Results

Based off the collected data, the anchors followed the consistent trend of showing more attempts to mitigate confrontation towards their male guests and more attempts to dominate over female guests. Additionally, all three anchors stated that the atmosphere in the Congressional hearing remained tense and divided on partisan lines.

Out of these three-hour Fox News broadcasts, the actual guest interviews comprised 80.5 minutes of data. Male guests appeared drastically more frequently than female guests with 54 minutes featuring men and 26.5 minutes including women. This indicates a greater sample size of male-addressed conversations. The total sample size was eighteen guests across the three anchors, twelve male and six female. Out of the male guests, ten were Republicans or Fox News Staff and two were Democrats. Among the female guests, five were Republicans or Fox News Staff and one was a Democrat.

As demonstrated in *Table 1*, the pooled usage of deferral techniques towards male guests was 0.961 instances per minute, while the pooled frequency towards female guests was a much smaller fraction of 0.161 instances per minute. The most common authoritative technique employed was interruption or overlapping followed by rebuke or correction of the guest. Described in *Table 1*, anchors took more opportunities to dominate according to the guest's gender, making more attempts to show authority towards women. This is demonstrated by the pooled rate of 0.755 usages per minute of female guests' air time versus 0.185 for male guests.

*Table 1. Overall authority/deferral implementation rates per minute — pooled by gender, cross-compared with political affiliation, and compiled across anchors*

	Authority		Defer	
	Male Guest	Female	Male	Female
Democrat	0.645	<b>1.304</b>	<b>0.774</b>	0.087
Republican/Fox Staff	0	<b>0.189</b>	<b>0.82</b>	0.113
All Guests	0.185	<b>0.755</b>	<b>0.961</b>	0.161

The use of deferring language significantly rose when the guest being addressed was male, regardless of his political party. While speaking to a male with opposing political views, the female anchors offered an abundance of hedges and self-revisions, especially during conversations with Congressmen or polarizing discussions with Democratic strategists.

When addressing conservative, female Fox News contributors, anchors utilized deferral techniques such as hedges and self-revisions at an infrequent average rate of 0.11 occasions per minute (*Table 1*). However, in conversations with a Republican male guest, the anchors employed deferring devices at a rate of 0.82 occasions per minute (*Table 1*) — nearly eight times more often than the usage with conservative females. Additionally, the anchors asserted subtle examples of authoritative language when speaking to female Fox staff members. For example, Faulkner, Ingraham, and Bream respectively commanded a female Fox News correspondent to respond, failed to yield the floor to the Fox News Contributor for a sustained period, and overlapped over the Fox News Contributor.

Gender superseded political party as a discretionary tool when using deferring language. Even when comparing Republican females to Democratic males, the anchors deferred to the latter more than to their fellow female acquaintances. In speaking to Democratic women, the anchors, especially Faulkner, limited friendly extensions and demonstrated persistent attempts to gain the higher ground in their conversation. This is represented in *Table 1* with more than one overlap or command per minute from all anchors combined. On the other hand, when interacting with Democratic men, the anchors limited aggressive confrontation and balanced any ice in the atmosphere with mitigating hedges, indicating favorability towards males in most situations.

## Discussion

As representatives of their respective companies, political commentary anchors receive heavy scrutiny in their day-to-day actions on the job. Anchors have the authority and privilege to set the tone of news conversations, but, by doing so, they open

themselves up to cross-examination and the possibility for rebuttal. If the anchor produces flimsy arguments and cannot present a good command of the facts, viewers will not perceive him/her as credible or knowledgeable. An anchor must maximize opportunities to appear tough on guests while minimizing damage from guests with excellent cross-examining skills.

When unaddressed, gender and subconscious differences in the way people treat one another can serve as a basis for real-life denials of equal opportunity. While progressive and feminist activism have enabled gender-neutral language changes, inequities between males and females innately remain present in a traditionally male-dominated society (Sczesny et al., 2016). In recognition of this seemingly never-ending trap of societal repression, Sczesny et al. call upon governments to take preventive action to protect gender equality through sanctioning policies that favor use of gender-fair language. In demonstrating how female guests receive less favorable treatment than male guests, this study of female Fox News anchors' linguistic tendencies concurs with the findings from Sczesny et al. Females may continue to be short-changed despite an outward appearance of increased success and presence in previously male-dominated fields. Steiner (2017) details how females in the journalism field have gained a significantly greater presence over the past few decades, yet they have been hired for the wrong reasons, ranging from sex appeal to cheaper labor. If female anchors subconsciously promote favored treatment for men on national television, viewers will be unintentionally guided to continue marginalizing women despite the fact that many high level anchor positions are being filled by women. Though society makes a conscious effort to promote gender equality, members of each gender must ultimately stand united or risk casting the progressive faction aside.

Unfortunately, the female Fox News anchors studied appear to act tougher on women than men, which might make women appear to be collectively weaker than men when cross-examined. On the other hand, by showing differentiation from other women through conversational domination, these female anchors can stand out as unique and valuable to news networks, allowing them to advance their careers and news agenda. Discussing the

difficulties and disadvantageous bias female reporters face on the job, Weibel et al. (2008) discovered in a blind test that the average viewer values what anchors offer in terms of quality of insight and news delivery. Yet, once shown the reporter's gender, viewers have difficulty balancing their objective analysis with the associations of females and journalism. Since females do not have an equal standing in the journalism field, they need to build years of reputation before they can establish their credibility.

Controlling for political bias and isolating the impact of gender, the results from *Table 1* demonstrate favorable treatment towards Democratic male guests compared to Democratic female guests. In general, the news anchors made more interruptions or rebukes towards all Democratic guests. However, Ingraham in particular issued fourteen hedges towards her male guest, and she generally attached them to usages of vulgar language. To cool down any impassioned rhetoric against the Democratic Party and mitigate an indirect rebuke to her male Democratic guest, Ingraham offered quick asides to unrelated topics (e.g., comparing the political situation to a *Saturday Night Live* skit). Although anchors treated Democratic males and females tougher than their Republican equivalents through intensifying authoritative confrontations, the anchors diluted their sharp rebukes with mitigations when speaking to Democratic males.

While Bream, Ingraham, and Faulkner remain highly respected in their industries and earn millions of dollars per year, disadvantages for the female population reside in the status of power the few female elite keep. Having earned respect in the journalism field, the female anchors in this study appeared confident without fear of retaliation when cross-examining interviewees of both genders. Ingraham converted ample opportunities of polite disagreement to impassioned, unfiltered criticisms of opposing viewpoints, and Faulkner interrupted her female guest without rest, as illustrated in *Excerpt 1*. Such perceived toughness and ability to extract facts could be seen by viewers as characteristics of perseverance and accountability.

*Excerpt 1: Faulkner Interrupting Female Guest*

*Faulk:* One of the questions that should be asked is, how can you prove that your bias didn't interfere?

*Elrod:* I think to the point you just made, everyone's gonna have political opinions, it's just part of human [nature, it's just a part of who you are. But but not political bias and how does that weigh in.]

*Faulk:* [Not (xxx) though! What other bias could he have had?]

*Elrod:* And I think what we have got to see from Peter Strzok today is his proof that none of his political leanings influenced his dec-[ision makings.]

*Faulk:* [What do you need to see; what proves it?]

*Elrod:* (1.0) Ahh (0.2) hwa ah, I mean, I need, I need to, first of all we need to see there's not discrepancy in some of his testimony [right, which we've seen so far.]

*Faulk:* [Well there already has been because] sometimes he can remember stuff and sometimes he couldn't.

*Elrod:* And [secondly]

*Faulk:* [The very line], "we'll stop it," apparently he struggled to remember. Hold on one second, we're coming right back.

In contrast, female guests who did not have their own show could not stand up to their female anchors without seeming rude or ill-mannered. Whether interviewees made elective choices

to refrain from aggressive tactics or simply were not prepared in terms of anticipatory counters, differences between female interviewees and anchors displayed a lack of unified ability. Even though one female anchor, Shannon Bream, remained objectively diplomatic towards both genders, her lack of controversial and non-conventional behavior could result in diminished memorability. Furthermore, her show's 11 p.m. to midnight time slot does not represent a prime opportunity to appeal to viewers; Ingraham's prime time slot and Faulkner's daytime program possess greater visibility on the Fox News network.

These Fox News findings contradict the peer-reviewed Facebook study which found women had just as much assertiveness as men despite being warmer and friendlier (Park et al., 2016). Though the female anchors gave male guests benefits of deferral and fewer interruptions, the anchors exhibited less hesitation to interrupt or speak over female guests. Additionally, while the anchors in this study demonstrate strong assertiveness, the female guests who are indirectly repressed are not given equal opportunity to assert themselves in an interview. As a result, the general image produced by interviews with female anchors ends up portraying female guests in a lesser light than male guests. If these findings hold true across other environments, they would be in concurrence with former findings in which male employees consistently rated their female managers lower than equivalent male managers (Szymanska et al., 2018). Parallel to the Fox News study, female managers have a position of authority over male employees, which may correlate with male employees ranking their superiors lower. Even if females are in positions of power, submitting to males in lower positions could unintentionally support the societal stereotype that relegates genders back to their historic grouping as leaders or followers.

In trying to fine-tune the balance between yielding diplomacy and strong advocacy, extremes on either end have negative consequences. Depending on the pressing issue and priority at hand, one extreme could appear to be a tempting and reasonable method of resolving the conflict. The Fox News network serves as the major conservative media outlet, so the burden of responsibilities rests with its anchors. As Fox team

members, anchors might consider it their responsibility to defend not only their network's political angle, but also their own personal beliefs. Since American conservatism has greater male support than female, female conservative anchors naturally end up on the male-majority team when they prioritize allegiance to their political side. When groups of similar demographics end up civilly divided on the basis of rigid value-based beliefs, the balance might tip towards the desire to show individual strength rather than yield for compromise and unity.

Language can be used as verbal warfare or actions of allegiance. Using weapons to break down bonds holding a community together can cause a loss of collective power, resulting in weakness. Females, who have been historically viewed as delicate and shielded by males, need to take caution not to self-enforce this stereotype. When looking at the ways to remove division between female factions, a preliminary area of concern is how power and status gaps threaten female unity.

## **Conclusion**

Female journalists might face adversity as members of a marginalized gender group. But, with a resolution to advance their careers, these journalists might try to balance the societal expectation of feminine politeness with the competency expectation of assertiveness. As a result, gender stereotypes can be reinforced by women rather than broken down. This study displays not only differences in how women speak to men but also gender-targeted inequities in how women speak to other women.

Anchors Shannon Bream, Laura Ingraham, and Harris Faulkner all introduced more hedges when speaking to men versus women. Additionally, to varying extents, they attempted to overlap their female guests more often. During her activated moments, Ingraham appeared to subconsciously attach frequent hedges as she talked to men in an aggressive manner. In the opposite extreme, Faulkner interrupted a female guest many times but did not attach hedges. These differing gender treatments could have been subconsciously guided by ingrained social stereotypes,

which resulted in Faulkner losing mindfulness in the heat of the moment.

While general conclusions and areas of concern can be derived from this study, the results were limited by the small sample size of only three anchors, one news network, and one day of coverage. Additionally, since Ingraham had just one female guest for the duration of her show, the data on her strategies in addressing females provides only a glimpse of her overall interactions. Despite the limited sample size, the results suggest that a broader and more in-depth study is warranted to understand how women can rise and succeed collectively in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Future research can prioritize conceptualizing the influence of the recipient's gender and its ability to surpass political differences when people choose how to communicate professionally. One method of implementing this could be studying Congressional hearings. If a new study demonstrated that members favored more deferrals towards the opposite party's males while directing an inflated amount of imperatives to females within their own party, this concern for societal progressives may be warranted. This data could demonstrate repression at a legislative level, which would underscore the concern that increased female presence in leadership resembles a façade equivalent to patching a superficial band-aid over underlying inequality.

The absence of a quick fix to reduce gender stereotypes opens an opportunity for a second look at current active interventions such as the aggressive recruitment of female employees and the success of some women in challenging the status quo. Even though companies may prioritize hiring entry-level female employees to promote equality, the female hires can still lack the same chance for later success in attaining promotions and leadership roles compared to their male peers. At times of fight-or-flight moments, the Fox News female anchors succumbed to gender-targeted stereotypes through silencing women and deferring to men. This denied women an equal opportunity to display their critical analytical abilities. It is possible that a politically or socially divided society heightens tensions, causing other pressing priorities to distract from efforts

to change subconscious views on gender equality. Ultimately, this allows these inequities to remain alive and subtly ignored.



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