



"RIGHT, OKAY, IT'S AMAZING AH": CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE SPEAKER IN SINHALA RADIO TALK SHOWS

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INTRODUCTION

The role played by the media industry in the advancement of gender equality is considered to be significant. This is because media has been deemed to reflect as well as create patterns related to society and culture, and provide sociocultural norms, thus shaping public opinion. Although much research has been conducted in relation to television and gender representation, not many studies have been done in this field with regard to radio. In Sri Lanka, regular broadcasting started on 16 December 1925 (Thilakaratne, 2022). The radio station, which was functioning in Sri Lanka, was named 'Radio Ceylon' on 1 October 1949 (Sterling, 2003). By the 1990s, and after the economy had been opened to the world in 1978, the stage was set for the setting up and flourishing of privately owned radio channels. Today, Sri Lanka has more than 50 radio stations operating in all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Even though television became a popular digital media after its introduction to Sri Lanka in 1979, it never has quite replaced radio when it comes to the purposes of communication and entertainment. As Perera (2022) points out, today, Sri Lankan radio stations have innovatively caught the hearts of people with their creative programmes that cater to the entertainment needs of the ordinary Sri Lankan; with programmes that allow listeners to participate through calls, text messages and social media, radio channels continue to stay closely connected to the day-to-day lives of the people. Therefore, even after almost a century since its introduction to Sri Lanka, radio is a popular medium for even socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. However, there is virtually no research that has been conducted in relation to radio and gender representation in this context.

Gender has been studied in relation to television talk shows. For example, Perez (2020) in a large-scale study of television talk shows in the USA and several European countries, including the UK, used content analysis on prime time and late-night shows in order to assess the extent to which traditional gender stereotypes were being represented. She also attempted to investigate to what extent these shows were challenging hegemonic notions of gender by the portrayals on television talk shows. She found that men were more likely to perform a more dominant role on these programmes, specially, acting as main host of the shows, and that women tend to appear in roles that are far less dominant, and use less humour than males.

In the area of radio, much research has been carried out on gender related issues in radio advertising (e.g. Monk-Turner et. al 2007; Furnham and Thompson 1999). Monk et. al. in a content analysis of more than one hundred radio advertisements, found that 72% of all central characters represented in radio advertisements were males, and that males were significantly more likely to be shown as authorities on products rather than as users while females were portrayed more often than males in dependent roles. Furnham and Thompson as well as Monk-Turner et.al found that males were significantly more likely to use scientific arguments to sell products compared to females. Both sets of researchers believe that "changes in gender stereotyping on this type of media [radio] may lag behind those for television advertisements".

In the context of the dearth of research in the genre as well as the medium, there is a need to investigate gender and verbal behaviour found in radio talk shows, since it is a very popular radio show format in the country. Therefore, in this study, the verbal interaction patterns occurring in daytime radio talk shows in Sri Lanka by private FM radio channels are



investigated using theoretical frameworks of gender and language – Deficiency, Dominance and Difference models – in order to discern what patterns of gendered verbal behaviour (mostly) young audiences are exposed to. The talk that is carried out on radio is crucial because it is only through voice and verbal behaviour that a presenter's identity can be constructed and gender can be represented. The aim of this study therefore was to investigate verbal interaction patterns of mixed sex radio talk-show presenters and explore the construction of the female speaker in these interactions.

One of the key characteristics of women's speech in the Deficiency theory of language and gender proposed by Lakoff (1975) is the rising intonation on declarative sentences, which is considered to produce the effect of uncertainty. In this context Linneman's (2013) study is pertinent, even though it is related to TV rather than radio. He used the popular US television game show *Jeopardy!* to study variation in the use of rising intonation on declaratives (uptalk) among the contestants' responses, and argues that uptalk is a key way in which gender is constructed through interaction. He found that while overall, *Jeopardy!* contestants use uptalk 37 percent of the time, there is much variation in the use of uptalk. Men use uptalk more when surrounded by women contestants, and when correcting a woman contestant after she makes an incorrect response. He points out that success on the show produces different results for men and women; the more successful a man is, the less likely he is to use uptalk; the more successful a woman is, the more likely she is to use uptalk.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate cross sex interaction patterns in radio talk shows, three of the most popular talk -shows from three radio channels were selected. "Morning Drives" and "Evening Drives" are two widely listened-to radio genres in Sri Lanka. The target listeners (or hearers) of these shows are mainly the people who travel to and from work every day – i.e. users of public transport and also people who travel in their own vehicles to and from work. With interesting scripted dialogues, jokes, quizzes, competitions and a myriad of entertainment segments, these talk shows promise to make people forget the time spent on the road standing and sitting uncomfortably in buses or held up in traffic during morning and evening rush hour. Data for the study were collected from three such popular shows broadcast by three radio channels widely listened to across Sri Lanka: the morning show 'DJ Ara and Pasbara' broadcast by Hiru FM (FM 96.1/96.3), the evening show 'Tech Nick Handawa' broadcast by Sirasa FM (FM 106.5/106.7), and the morning show 'Ata Paas' broadcast by Neth FM (FM 95/94.8). They are broadcast Monday to Friday for 2-3 hours, and hosted by mixed sex presenters: a male and a female in two talk shows, and, two males and one female in the other. One-hour long segments were randomly recorded from each talk show in the year 2021, amounting to a total of a three-hour long dataset.

The recordings were transcribed using the Jefferson Transcription System and a qualitative content analysis was carried out based on the three variationist frameworks of language use and gender: Robin Lakoff's (1975) Deficiency model of gendered language behaviour where she outlined typical features of women's speech, and pointed out that women's language was deficient in terms of semantic content, the Dominance model (O'Barr and Atkins, 1980, West and Zimmerman, 1983; Spender, 1985) and the Difference model (Maltz and Borker, 1982; Coates, 1986, Tannen, 1990). These frameworks which theorise the way language us reflects gender, were used to conduct the content analysis on the radio talk show segments. The Dominance model posits that males casually infringe on women's speaking turns and constantly interrupt women, as well as use silence and delayed minimal responses in order to discourage conversation. The Difference theories have two opposing sets of verbal behaviour that represents males and females, theorizing that women use talk to establish connections and relationships, as opposed to men who organize themselves hierarchically in conversation and have a competitive perspective.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to data, one of the main roles of the female presenter in all the three talk shows seems to have been to provide minimal response, feedback and fillers such as “mmm hmm:”, “yeah yeah:?”, “ah” “right” etc. The male presenter was found to be announcing the important facts, explaining complex situations and recounting stories in all instances. In addition to the fillers, the female presenter often added words of surprise and adjectives that were not essential to the main narrative, for instance “wo::w, s:s, it’s amazing, ah!”. The Difference theory of language and gender posits that women and men are socialized differently, and that women are socialized to be ‘cooperative’ speakers as opposed to men who are ‘competitive’ speakers. Thus, it is said that women use more backchannelling and feedback utterances such as “hmm, mmm, and utterances which support their interlocutor in the speech event of conversation. Another feature noted in the language used by the female presenters was exaggeration which was achieved through intensifiers that are often used in colloquial Sinhala, such as *full* in the case of “it was full real” and *patta* which stands for super, in the case of “patta technology”. This is also a feature of Lakoff’s “women’s language” where she pointed out the use of ‘empty’ adjectives and emphatic stress as well as strong intensifiers. Further, the theory posits that women use precise colour terms such as lilac and mauve etc., and it was seen that in this data the female host used precise details about colour, such as “chocolate coloured pigeon”.

Labov (1972) and other early sociolinguistic studies which included samples of males and females, found that there is evidence of difference between the linguistic behaviour of men and women. Many studies (e.g., Wolfram, 1969, Labov, 1990) found that women show a greater sensitivity to socially evaluative linguistic features. Thus, it has been found that women use language forms that have more social prestige. Poussa (2001, 2006) and Cheshire, (1998:413) posit that “women are often more aware of the social significance of different linguistic forms and they use more socially prestigious speech forms”. Lakoff in her theory reflects this prominent finding in terms of women using “hypercorrect grammar forms”. Thus, it was found that the female presenter always used English during conversations, sometimes as fillers and sometimes in the middle of sentences. However, more often than not, the English words were pronounced with stress, often in high pitch, with dynamic and rising intonations, and, along with sharp inhales and exhales – for instance, “>Oh my god<, FIFTEEN, pahalawak neda Ara?”. It was noticed that certain English words were pronounced with an accent, for example, *okay* as “aukay:↑” and *yes* as “ye::rz”. However, the rising and dynamic intonation and emphatic stress were not limited to English words, it was found across speech in all three talk shows. All these features are found in Lakoff’s deficiency theory of language and gender.

Another role played by the female presenter was providing laughter; data showed that it was the duty of the female to laugh at all the humorous remarks of the male presenter. The female figure also generated humour by herself during conversations, but at such instances, the laughter was provided through a sound effect. The female presenter was often the object of laughter and insults with the male presenter pointing out her lack of intelligence, ignorance and trivial, child-like nature. In addition, she was portrayed as timid and easily frightened; for example, when a tale about murder was recounted by the male presenter, the female presenter responded with an upward pitched aspiration followed by a saying which means *don’t frighten me*, “.HHH↑ (.) mawa baya nan karanna epa”. The dominance explanations that arose in the 1970s linked the negative evaluations of women’s language (found in the deficiency theory) to their social domination by men. “It wasn’t that women were incapable of vital language; rather, men took the upper hand in conversation” (Bergvall, 1999:277) The data in this study also showed that the female host was repeatedly interrupted by the male host during conversations. Further, the radio names of the presenters such as ‘Sukiri’ (literally ‘sugar candy’) and ‘Pasbara’ (Ostrich = flightless bird) and “Jeenu / Jeans” added to the diminutive,



trivial and child-like representation of the female talk-show presenters, whereas the men had names like "Tech Nick Aiya" and "Loku Malli" which have connotations of authority.

CONCLUSIONS

The construction of the female presenters as deficient, lacking power, as child-like and without any world-knowledge, as well as those who are needed only to support conversations, and be cooperative, is literally a performance (Butler, 1990) in the medium of radio talk shows and this performance of the submissive female is possibly the marketable version of femininity which the radio networks think audiences would like to buy, given their aim of light entertainment. However, the researchers caution that such performances are likely to promote and reinforce misogyny and create further gender discrimination in society.

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