

Women Are Sort of More Tentative Than Men, Aren't They?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Women hedge, issue disclaimers and ask questions when they communicate, language features that can suggest uncertainty, lack of confidence and low status. But men do the same, according to new research from the University of California, Davis.

"It's a stereotype that men are direct while [women](#) are tentative. I debunk that [stereotype](#)," said Nicholas Palomares, assistant professor of communication at UC Davis.

Palomares reports his findings in "Women Are Sort of More Tentative Than Men, Aren't They?," an article in the August issue of the journal *Communication Research*.

"I found that women are more tentative than men sometimes, and men are more tentative than women sometimes," Palomares said. "It depends on the topic and whether you're communicating with someone of the same gender. Gender differences in language are not innate; they're fickle."

In his study, Palomares asked nearly 300 UC Davis undergraduates -- about half of them female and half male -- to write e-mails explaining how to change a flat tire or buy make-up, among other gender-stereotyped and gender-neutral topics. Students were given the name and gender of the person they were e-mailing.

Men were tentative when writing about make-up or other stereotypically

feminine topics, especially when they thought they were writing to a woman, he found. For example, one man, believing he was corresponding with a woman, wrote: "... maybe girls prefer the quality of products at Sephora over other major department stores? I don't know."

Women were tentative when writing about changing flat tires and other stereotypically masculine topics, especially when they thought they were writing to a man. For example, one woman, believing she was giving instructions to a man, wrote: "I think they start out by raising the whole car, or maybe just the one tire with a tire jack?"

Language was judged tentative if it included "hedges" (sort of, maybe, pretty much, probably, might, kinda), "disclaimers" (I'm not sure, I may be wrong, don't trust me, but you should double-check) or "tag questions" (don't you think? isn't it? right?).

Palomares found no gender difference in tentativeness when he asked his subjects to write e-mails about gender-neutral topics, such as recommending a good restaurant.

His conclusion: Some topics cause men and women to think and communicate in terms of their gender, which leads to tentativeness when the topic is inconsistent with their gender.

"The metaphor that men and women are from different planets should be jettisoned and replaced with a more accurate one," Palomares writes in his article. "Men and women are from different blocks in the same neighborhood, and they tend to move often."

The article is subtitled "How [Men](#) and Women Use Tentative Language Differently, Similarly, and Counter-stereotypically as a Function of [Gender](#) Salience."

Provided by University of California, Davis

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