

THE INTERPLAY OF SEX, POLITENESS, AND STEREOTYPES IN LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION IN ENOLA HOLMES

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politeness, and stereotypes in Enola Holmes (2020) and Enola Holmes 2 (2022), focusing on Enola's interactions with Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Butler's (1990) gender performativity framework, the research analyzes how Enola employs politeness and directness to navigate social expectations. The findings reveal that Enola challenges traditional gender stereotypes by using assertive language with Sherlock, countering the idea that women are inherently indirect and deferential. Her polite exchanges with Mycroft, meanwhile, demonstrate that politeness can function as resistance, not just submission. This analysis highlights the adaptability of gendered communication, where politeness and assertiveness are used contextually rather than being tied to sex. Ultimately, the research shows how media like Enola Holmes both reflects and challenges societal expectations about gendered communication, offering a more nuanced view of language, gender, and power.

*This study examines the
interplay between sex,*

Introduction

In sociolinguistics, gendered communication has long been a focal point of investigation, particularly regarding how politeness strategies differ between men and women. Politeness theory, as formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987), offers a framework for understanding how individuals navigate social hierarchies and relationships through linguistic choices. The ways in which gender influences these choices have been debated extensively, with scholars such as Holmes (1995) and Tannen (1990) contributing significant insight into how women's and men's language use diverges, particularly in politeness, directness, and emotional expression.

Set in the late 19th century, the Enola Holmes films provide an intriguing case study for examining gendered communication within a historical context. The film series centers on Enola Holmes, a young woman in a male-dominated society, whose unconventional linguistic strategies reflect both the societal constraints of her era and a resistance to gender norms. By focusing on the language used by Enola and other central characters, this study seeks to analyze how gender influences politeness strategies and how these strategies either challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes within the film.

This research is anchored in the intersection of gender, linguistics, and media representation. It aims to deepen our understanding of how language serves as a medium for both adhering to and subverting gender expectations in a historical context, as portrayed through film.

Review of Literature

Politeness theory, as established by Brown and Levinson (1987), has been foundational in understanding how speakers mitigate face-threatening acts through strategies that either align with positive politeness (expressing camaraderie, compliments) or negative politeness (minimizing imposition, using hedging or indirectness). These strategies are employed differently across gender lines, with women traditionally seen as more likely to use indirect language and mitigate face threats to preserve relationships (Holmes, 1995).

Gender and Politeness

Holmes (1995) noted that women, compared to men, tend to employ more politeness markers in conversation. This difference is often attributed to social expectations that women should be more accommodating and non-confrontational. Men, conversely, are frequently associated with more direct and assertive speech, in line with societal expectations of male dominance and authority. Lakoff (1975) famously described women's language as being characterized by uncertainty and deference, resulting from the subordinate position of women in many societies.

Tannen (1990) further expanded on these ideas in her examination of gender and communication styles, noting that women's conversational styles are more likely to seek connection and avoid conflict, while men are more concerned with status and independence. This distinction reflects broader societal gender roles and stereotypes, with women often socialized to be cooperative and men to be competitive.

Media and Gendered Communication

In film and other media, these gendered linguistic patterns are often exaggerated or challenged, shaping audience perceptions of gender roles. Butler (1990) explored the notion that gender is performative, suggesting that media representations of gender are a form of performance that both reflects and shapes societal expectations. Films such as *Enola Holmes* offer a medium through which these performances can be analyzed, particularly regarding how language is used to either conform to or resist traditional gender roles.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyzing the linguistic strategies of politeness, directness, and gender stereotyping in the *Enola Holmes* films. By focusing on dialogue between central characters, particularly Enola, Sherlock, and other male figures, the research will examine how linguistic choices reflect or challenge traditional gender roles in communication.

The research will analyze the films *Enola Holmes* (2020) and *Enola Holmes 2* (2022), directed by Harry Bradbeer and based on the novels by Nancy Springer. These films were chosen due to their central focus on a female protagonist navigating a patriarchal society, making them ideal for examining gendered communication patterns.

Key scenes from both films will be selected and transcribed to capture instances where politeness strategies, directness, or stereotypical gendered communication are apparent. The scenes will be chosen based on interactions between Enola and key male figures, such as Sherlock Holmes, Mycroft Holmes, and other societal figures like law enforcement and nobility. Particular attention will be paid to dialogue that involves requests, disagreements, or emotional expression, as these are commonly associated with politeness strategies.

Politeness Theory Framework

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory will serve as the primary analytical framework. Dialogue will be categorized based on the following politeness strategies:

1. Positive Politeness: Instances where characters use language to build solidarity, such as compliments or expressions of camaraderie.
2. Negative Politeness: Instances where characters seek to avoid imposing on others, characterized by indirectness, apologies, and deference.
3. Direct vs. Indirect Communication: The degree of directness in speech will be analyzed, with a focus on how characters differ by gender in their use of commands, requests, and assertions.

Gendered Linguistic Features

The analysis will also include an examination of gendered linguistic markers, such as the use of tag questions, hedging, and emotional expression. These markers will be analyzed in terms of how they conform to or challenge traditional gender stereotypes.

Stereotype Analysis

A content analysis of how gender stereotypes are portrayed through language will be conducted. This will include examining whether female characters, particularly Enola, conform to linguistic expectations of politeness and indirectness or whether they subvert these norms by using assertive or direct language.

Contextual Analysis

Given the historical setting of the films, the analysis will consider how the time period influences the language used by both male and female characters. This will involve exploring the constraints on women's speech in the Victorian era and how the characters either conform to or defy these societal expectations.

Results and Discussion

Scene Analysis

The selected scenes from *Enola Holmes* (2020) and *Enola Holmes 2* (2022) provide a nuanced portrayal of gendered communication, particularly in the interactions between Enola Holmes and other central male figures such as Sherlock Holmes and Mycroft Holmes.

The dialogue was transcribed, and the analysis identified instances of positive and negative politeness strategies, direct versus indirect communication, and the reinforcement or subversion of gender stereotypes.

Scene Example 1: Interaction Between Enola and Sherlock Holmes (Enola Holmes 2020)

In a scene where Enola meets Sherlock for advice, she seeks his assistance in a matter concerning her missing mother. Sherlock initially employs negative politeness strategies, aiming to minimize imposition by using indirect language such as, “You may find that it’s not so simple.” In contrast, Enola responds with assertive and direct language, saying, “I don’t need your help, brother.” This moment highlights a reversal of traditional gendered linguistic expectations, as Enola demonstrates a high level of directness typically associated with male communication patterns (Tannen, 1990).

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, Enola’s direct communication is a face-threatening act toward Sherlock, who represents a male authority figure. However, Enola’s linguistic choices challenge the stereotypical notion that women are more polite, indirect, and deferential, thereby resisting the expectations of her gender in the patriarchal society of the 19th century.

Scene Example 2: Enola and Mycroft Holmes (Enola Holmes 2020)

In contrast, during an exchange with her older brother Mycroft, Enola adopts a more indirect and polite approach. When Mycroft reprimands her for being unladylike, Enola responds with, “I’ll try to do better.” This response demonstrates negative politeness, as Enola employs hedging to reduce the imposition and soften the criticism directed at her. Such politeness markers align with Holmes' (1995) observation that women often use language to maintain harmony and avoid conflict.

However, this politeness is a strategic choice rather than a reflection of Enola's submission. Her polite response masks her underlying resistance to conforming to gender norms, revealing the complex interplay between politeness, gender, and power dynamics in the narrative.

Scene Example 3: Interaction with Lord Tewkesbury (Enola Holmes 2020)

In her interactions with Lord Tewkesbury, Enola alternates between positive politeness strategies and directness. When encouraging Tewkesbury, she often employs camaraderie and supportive language, such as, “You can do it; I believe in you.” However, when faced with danger, she quickly shifts to more direct communication, issuing commands like, “Run!” This adaptability highlights Enola’s ability to navigate social expectations, using politeness strategies selectively to assert her independence and authority.

Gendered Linguistic Features

Throughout the analyzed scenes, Enola frequently employs linguistic markers such as tag questions and hedging but often uses them to gain control of the conversation rather than demonstrate uncertainty. For instance, when asking, “You don’t really believe that, do you?” she uses a tag question to challenge Sherlock’s perspective, showcasing her linguistic assertiveness.

This contrasts with the male characters, who predominantly use direct communication without such markers, reinforcing their perceived dominance and authority. However, Enola's usage of stereotypically feminine linguistic features as a tool to assert her viewpoints challenges Lakoff's (1975) assertion that such markers inherently indicate a speaker's lack of confidence or subordination.

Politeness Strategies and Stereotypes

The analysis revealed that male characters, such as Sherlock and Mycroft, predominantly employ negative politeness to maintain distance and authority, while Enola skillfully balances positive and negative politeness to navigate her interactions. This aligns with the idea that women tend to be more versatile in their use of politeness strategies, as noted by Holmes (1995).

However, Enola's ability to switch between politeness strategies indicates her resistance to conforming to the expected submissive female role, subverting gender stereotypes and asserting her agency. This aligns with Butler's (1990) notion of gender as performative, suggesting that Enola's linguistic choices are a deliberate act of defiance against societal expectations.

Contextual Analysis

Considering the historical Victorian setting, societal norms dictated that women should be deferential and accommodating in their language. However, Enola's speech often defies these expectations, embodying the more assertive and direct communication style reserved for men. This linguistic rebellion signifies her resistance to the patriarchal constraints of her time and highlights the evolution of gender roles and expectations.

The mini-research demonstrates that Enola Holmes serves as a rich case study for examining the interplay of sex, politeness, and stereotypes in linguistic communication. Enola's character disrupts traditional gendered communication patterns by employing a blend of politeness strategies, directness, and assertiveness. Her ability to navigate between politeness strategies challenges the stereotype that women are inherently more indirect and deferential, showcasing how gendered communication is not static but performative and adaptable.

This research contributes to the broader understanding of gendered communication by highlighting how media representations like Enola Holmes can both reflect and challenge societal expectations of gendered language use. The findings align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory while also extending the discussion on how gender and politeness intersect in contemporary media portrayals.

The analysis of scenes from *Enola Holmes* (2020) and *Enola Holmes 2* (2022) reveals the intricate relationship between sex, politeness, and stereotypes, especially in the context of gendered communication. The interplay of these elements is evident through the linguistic strategies employed by Enola and the male characters, particularly Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes. Here's how these factors interact:

Sex and Gendered Communication

Traditional linguistic expectations often associate men with direct, assertive communication, while women are expected to be more indirect, polite, and deferential. However, Enola defies these gender norms by using a range of communication strategies, from directness to positive and negative politeness, which is typically associated with femininity. Enola's ability to shift between assertiveness and politeness shows that gendered communication patterns are fluid and adaptable rather than fixed or inherent.

Politeness Strategies

Enola's use of politeness varies based on context and the relationship with the interlocutor. While she uses direct communication (typically seen as a masculine trait) with Sherlock, she adopts more polite and indirect language with Mycroft, revealing her strategic approach. This illustrates that politeness is not simply about maintaining harmony, as Holmes (1995) suggests, but can be used as a tool to navigate power dynamics and assert control. By balancing both positive and negative politeness, Enola resists the stereotype that women must be submissive and demonstrates how politeness strategies can be wielded to subvert power imbalances.

Stereotypes and Resistance

Throughout the narrative, Enola challenges traditional gender stereotypes, particularly the notion that women are inherently more polite, indirect, or uncertain in their speech. She employs linguistic markers like tag questions, not as a sign of uncertainty, but as a way to challenge authority figures like Sherlock. This subversion of stereotypes aligns with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, where Enola's language becomes an act of resistance against patriarchal norms. Her communication style shows that gendered expectations around politeness are not rigid, and can be strategically performed or resisted depending on context.

In conclusion, Enola Holmes disrupts conventional ideas about gendered communication by demonstrating that politeness and linguistic strategies are not inherently tied to sex, but are performative and adaptable. Enola's character serves as a powerful example of how gender, language, and power dynamics can intersect to challenge societal expectations, ultimately subverting the stereotype that women are confined to being more polite or indirect. This portrayal encourages a broader understanding of gender as a flexible construct, highlighting the importance of agency in how individuals choose to communicate within patriarchal structures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of scenes from *Enola Holmes* (2020) and *Enola Holmes 2* (2022) reveals a complex interaction between sex, politeness, and stereotypes in linguistic communication. Enola's character strategically navigates gendered expectations through her varied use of politeness strategies and assertiveness, defying traditional notions of female communication as inherently indirect and deferential. Her directness with Sherlock challenges masculine communication norms, while her polite interactions with Mycroft display the use of politeness as a tool for resistance rather than submission. These findings

demonstrate that politeness is not bound by gender but is contextually performative, aligning with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. By subverting stereotypes through her language, Enola disrupts patriarchal expectations, showing that gendered communication is fluid and adaptable. This challenges static views on gendered language, highlighting how media can reflect and reshape societal norms on gender and communication.

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