

# Gender Variation in Mix-gender Conversations in the Semi-institutional Discourse: The Case of Talk Show

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**Abstract.** In this paper, gender-related variations in the semi-institutional discourse are examined. We investigate the cross-gender conversation in the talk show *Behind the Headline with Wentao*, a corpus of around 88,000 words of Mandarin Chinese conversation and identify gender variation between female and male guests. We explore the turn-taking features and characteristic terms that set the gender categories apart. We observe that female speakers tend to produce more and longer turns when discussion topics about people and relationships whereas males have longer turns when discussing leisure activities and issues. Generational differences across binary gender groups show that females use more hedges of various functions than males. The results also suggested that male and female speakers tend to use more gendered terms when the conversational topics involved people and relationships.

**Keywords:** gender difference · conversation topic · hedges · turn-taking

## 1 Introduction

Conversation is the primary form of socialized human interaction which is playing a major role in the activities performed in human communities. In this paper, we are going to investigate the gender-related variation of mix-gender conversation in the semi-institutional discourse of the talk show.

When people were asked to evaluate the general perception of ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ through the use of adjective pairs, females are evaluated to be less aggressive, less assertive, less dominant, more emotional, and more timid [2, 5]. The perception may affect how people evaluate the behaviors of people of different genders. Male managers who are talkative in the meeting may be considered as ‘powerful’ whereas female managers who are more dominant in the same situation would be considered not feminine or even ‘slut’. However, such gendered linguistic practices are socially-constructed behaviors rather than merely based on gender. Therefore, the dominance of female managers is better characterized as ‘masculine-stereotyped’ than based on their gender [13].

Talkativeness and turn-taking are two common features for investigating substantive gender differences. For talkativeness, Leaper and Ayres [14] observed that males are more talkative in mix-gender conversation than in same-gender conversation. Men’s greater talkativeness was more likely to occur during discussion of impersonal topics whereas females are more talkative during socioemotional contexts that involved either interactions with children or self-disclosure topics [19]. In terms of turn-taking which refers to the length of the speaker’s conversational turns, it is suggested that men are more likely to dominate in conversation because they are in a high-authority position [12]. However, Leaper and Robnett [15] proposed that gender differences may be mitigated when women and men engage in similar activities or topics.

This study explores the gender variation in cross-gender conversations in the semi-institutional discourse of a talk show. We investigate whether there are gender differences in terms of turn-taking properties and lexical choices in similar conversational topics. We investigate this question using a dataset of the semi-institutional discourse of a talk show in Mandarin Chinese.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Semi-institutional discourse - talk show

Ilie [8] proposed the term semi-institutional discourse to refer to the talk show as a socio-cultural practice marked by a particular component of the participant, i.e. show host, guest speaker, and/or audience and well-established conventions, as well as by spontaneous interventions and unpredictable outcomes. In the talk show, celebrities and/or experts as well as ordinary people can be invited as show guests to discuss a topic on current issues of social and/or personal interests. The asymmetrical role distribution in talk shows determines that the show host has the institutional authority to control the show and monitor most of the conversations by asking questions or giving comments etc. Even the guests or experts whose expertise in a particular field is invaluable to the ongoing discussion have to accommodate their contributions according to the role assigned to them and follow the lead of the show host. Apart from the institutional roles, the participants may also exhibit non-institutional roles when a talk show is meant to provide insights into the participants’ real life. Therefore, the talk show becomes the setting for the deconstruction and reconstruction of the participants’ complex identities as social individuals [8].

### 2.2 Gender difference in conversational topics

The systematic study of gender differences in conversation topics started by Bischoing [18]. For investigating the gender difference in the conversational topic, the data of the same-sex and cross-sex conversation were collected from various conversation settings, such as from the audible conversation on the street [18] as well as in a faculty room in a middle school [11]. These conversation

topics have been summarized in Bischooping [1]’s quantitative observation study by comparing the gender differences in conversation topics from 1922 to 1990 (Figure 1). Among the conversation topics in these 5 topic areas, it is observed that the majority of women’s conversations are about people and relationship, followed by appearances whereas topics about work and money as well as leisure activities are more popular in men’s conversations [1, 18]. Issues which include social and political issues were a more popular topic in male conversation [1]. However, Kipers [11] observed in the faculty room in the middle school that the majority of conversations about social issues were discussed by female groups. Politics is the most popular topic in groups comprised of both males and females.

**Fig. 1.** Categories of conversation topics in Bischooping [1]

Topic area	Category	Examples
People and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persons of same sex</li> <li>• Persons of opposite sex</li> </ul>	Personalities, biographies Dating, parents’ anniversary
Work and money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic</li> <li>• Career plans</li> <li>• Jobs</li> <li>• Money</li> </ul>	Studying, professors LSAT scores, graduate schools Summer jobs, current work Borrowing money, good buys
Leisure activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Other leisure activities</li> </ul>	Football games, working out Sorority events, movies
Appearances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal appearance and clothes</li> </ul>	Hair style, leather jackets
Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social and political issues</li> </ul>	Abortion, recycling, Iraq

Apart from investigating the sex difference, Haas and Sherman [6] suggested that role is a more reliable variable in determining the topic of the conversation. In daily life, it is observed that men and women address different topics when they are in different social roles such as friend, co-worker, sibling, parent, and child in same-sex conversation. For instance, men friends frequently talk about sports whereas family and clothing are popular topics in female co-workers’ conversations. In the talk show, participants can be assigned roles as either show host who has the controlling power or invited guest speakers who follow the lead of the host to discuss a topic on current issues of social and/or personal interests. The distribution and sequential occurrence of turn-taking behaviors would reflect the nature of the particular semi-institutional discourse type [8].

### 2.3 Gender difference in turn-taking and lexical use

Two theoretical frameworks are usually used to understand gender differences. One is the subcultural approach which proposes that men and women were brought up differently and they have different communication styles [20]. Another one is the authority approach which emphasizes the power of authority [21]. Time talked, interruption, overlap and hedges are commonly investigated to show gender differences. Under the framework of the subcultural approach, it

is generally believed that women’s language is marginal, and powerless whereas men’s language is important and powerful [12]. Therefore, men will talk more and are more likely to interrupt women in the conversation. However, Liesenfeld et al. [16] observed that females produce significantly more turns than males in British English conversation.

In addition, hedges are the linguistic feature in women’s speech to show uncertainty. Since the situational approach believes that authority is more important than gender to understand conversations. Therefore, people who have power, such as managers, regardless of gender, talk more and have a higher rate of interruption. People in the subordinate position talk less and use more hedges [9].

### 3 Data and method

#### 3.1 Data description

The talk show *Behind the Headline with Wentao* enjoys tremendous popularity for several reasons. First, the topics discussed are very challenging, trying to come to the grips with highly problematic and controversial, but widely shared, concerns about current issues in the public and in the private sphere: social and professional conflicts, marginalization, feminism, etc. In the talk show *Behind the Headline with Wentao*, the cross-gender conversation involved one male guest and one female guest whereas another same-gender conversation in which two male guests participated in the conversation can be found.

Following Bischooping [1]’s coding, a total of 95 episodes of same-gender conversation (51) and cross-gender conversations (44) in the talk show were coded. This study focuses on the analysis of 44 cross-gender conversations. Considering the asymmetrical power distribution of show host and guest speaker, only utterances of male and female guests are compared and analyzed. However, the show host’s utterances to announce the start of the programme are helpful to determine the conversational topic. Under people and relationship conversational topic, Bischooping categorizes two sub-topics as persons of the same sex and persons of the opposite sex. Considering the nature of the talk show context and the components of the participants, these two sub-topics are changed to celebrities who are known by the public or ordinary people who is the main protagonist in the discussion. I focus on the summary of the episode and/or the topic announced by the show host at the start of the programme to extract the topic area of each episode. For example:

Summary: 核心提示: 最近, 继自来水质量之后, 北京的空气质量又一次引发全民关注和讨论。在发展生产和保护生存环境之间, 我们应该如何平衡? 本期节目, 窦文涛和许子东、马家辉共同讨论环境保护。

Show host: 他们让我们讲一个我们都不太熟的事, 马云, 阿里巴巴的, 也是创始人, 然后董事局。

This approach to extract topic area of each episode proved to be reliable. The agreement between my coding and that of a second coder who independently

categorized a subsample of 50 conversations into the five broad topic areas and the residual category was 65.44%. 3 topic areas are found in the talk show *Behind the Headline with Wentao* (Table 1).

Topics areas	Category	No. of cross-gender conversations
People and relationships	celebrity/ordinary people	8
Leisure activities	sports/other leisure activities	5
Issues	social and political issues	31
Total		44

**Table 1.** Number of cross-gender conversations in each topic area.

It is observed that the majority of the cross-gender conversations discussed in the talk show *Behind the Headline with Wentao* are about issues which include social and political issues followed by people and relationship containing celebrity and ordinary people and leisure activities including sports and other leisure activities such as movies.

### 3.2 Methods

In order to compare the gender variations in language use between male and female guests, 44 cross-gender conversations are selected and each episode contains a male guest and a female guest. It is worth mentioning that the same guest may be re-invited in different episodes. We first examine turn frequency (the number of turns) and length of speakers’ conversational turns (words they speak) in each topic area by using HanLP [7] for tokenization. Then we compare the lexical and phrasal differences between male and female guests and use Scattertext [10] to distinguish different categories and visualize the results.

**Table 2.** Count of turns and words of males and females in each topic area.

Topic areas	Features	Count		Count Total
		Male guests	Female guests	
People and relationships	Turns	268	295	563
	Words	6,519	10,031	16,550
Leisure activities	Turns	125	138	263
	Words	4,740	4,095	8,835
Issues	Turns	819	792	1,611
	Words	33,652	28,915	62,567

## 4 Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Gender difference in turn-taking features

In Table 2, we observe that female guests have more turns and longer turn lengths than male guests in the discussion about people and relationship. Although females have more turns when discussing leisure activities, males produce longer turns. Moreover, males are dominant in the topic of issues. The results may indicate two phenomena. First, since the host has the right to control the question-asking [8], the show host may direct the conversation towards the guest who he thinks is more suitable to speak. For instance, in the below extract from an episode discussing David Beckham, the show host intentionally invited the female speaker to speak because he thought David Beckham and the female guest were both celebrities in the entertainment industry.

H: 不是广美很资格评点评点, 那小贝你印象怎么样, 我觉得他跟你是同行。

F: 什么意思?

Another phenomenon is related to the previous analysis where males and females have preferences in discussing different conversational topics [1, 11, 18]. It may imply that different gender groups may be more interested in or more familiar with certain topics so they discuss more. In an episode discussing the housing price, the male guest even directed the discussion to focus on the poor people who worked as a security guard in Shenzhen.

M: 客观来说中国的房价大概不会超过到纽约或者巴黎这些世界上最大城市。

F: 不可能的。

M: 你们关心那么伟大的宏图, 我最近注意到一件小的事情, 就是保安有很多穷人, 深圳保安。

### 4.2 Gender difference in lexical and phrasal choices

In the previous session, we observed that males have longer turn lengths and more turn frequencies in the topic areas of leisure activities and issues whereas females talked more when discussing people and relationship. In this session, we plot gender differences in terms of different topic areas to visualize the cross-gender differences at the n-gram level using Scattertext library [10]. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show words and phrases that are more characteristic of each gender group as well as presenting their frequencies based on the scaled F-score which is a modified metric of the harmonic mean of precision and recall of F-score.

We observe a range of terms that reflect gender groups in our dataset. For instance, the top 5 characteristic terms that are associated with male guests in leisure activities and issues topics are ‘中学’, ‘地震’, ‘社会’, ‘不能’ and ‘之间’ whereas ‘真的’, ‘感觉’, ‘之后’, ‘实际上’ and ‘最后’ are terms that are more associated with female guests’ speech. For people and relationship topics, the 5 characteristic terms that males use most are ‘嘛’, ‘它’, ‘问题’, ‘一样’ and ‘呢’ while that of female groups are ‘然后’, ‘拍’, ‘我...觉得’, ‘其实’ and ‘应该’.

Although males and females have different characteristic terms in different topic areas, common patterns are observed. It is found that females are more likely than males to use hedges in cross-gender conversations. In the context of Chinese podcast shows, Chai [3] observed similar findings that more hedging behaviors are used in cross-gender conversations. According to Lakoff [12], hedges are words that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy such as 'maybe' and 'perhaps' in English and '我觉得' in Chinese. The function of hedges is more than just to show uncertainty [12]. The four additional functions are the expression of doubt and confidence, sensitivity to others' feelings, researching for the right word, and avoidance of expert status [4]. In our dataset, four functions of hedges can be observed.

(1) Expression of doubt and confidence

F: 其实你刚刚讲到那个消费男色这件事情，其实我觉得我自己属于那种，对于男色比较有抵抗力。

(2) Sensitivity to other's feelings

F: 文道我感觉你不能这么太实的想这件事

(3) Researching for the right word

F: 足以怎么讲我觉得他已经把自己当成一个商品了

(4) Avoidance of expert status

F: 实际上要我们看的话还是挺不道义的

A closer look at the top 10 terms in different topic areas in Figure 2 and Figure 3, we observed that gender-neutral terms such as ('学生' and '人') and the gendered terms such as ('男人' and '她') are used in male and female speech. It seems that male and female speakers tend to use more gendered terms when discussing people and relationships.

M: 可能一千年以后的人会看我们说，那时候人都穿一高跟鞋，本质上没有区别。第一它取悦于男人，不是取悦于女人，高跟鞋和缠足都是这样，她本人并不舒服，首先这东西，高跟鞋咱也没穿过，但我想那事肯定不会舒服。

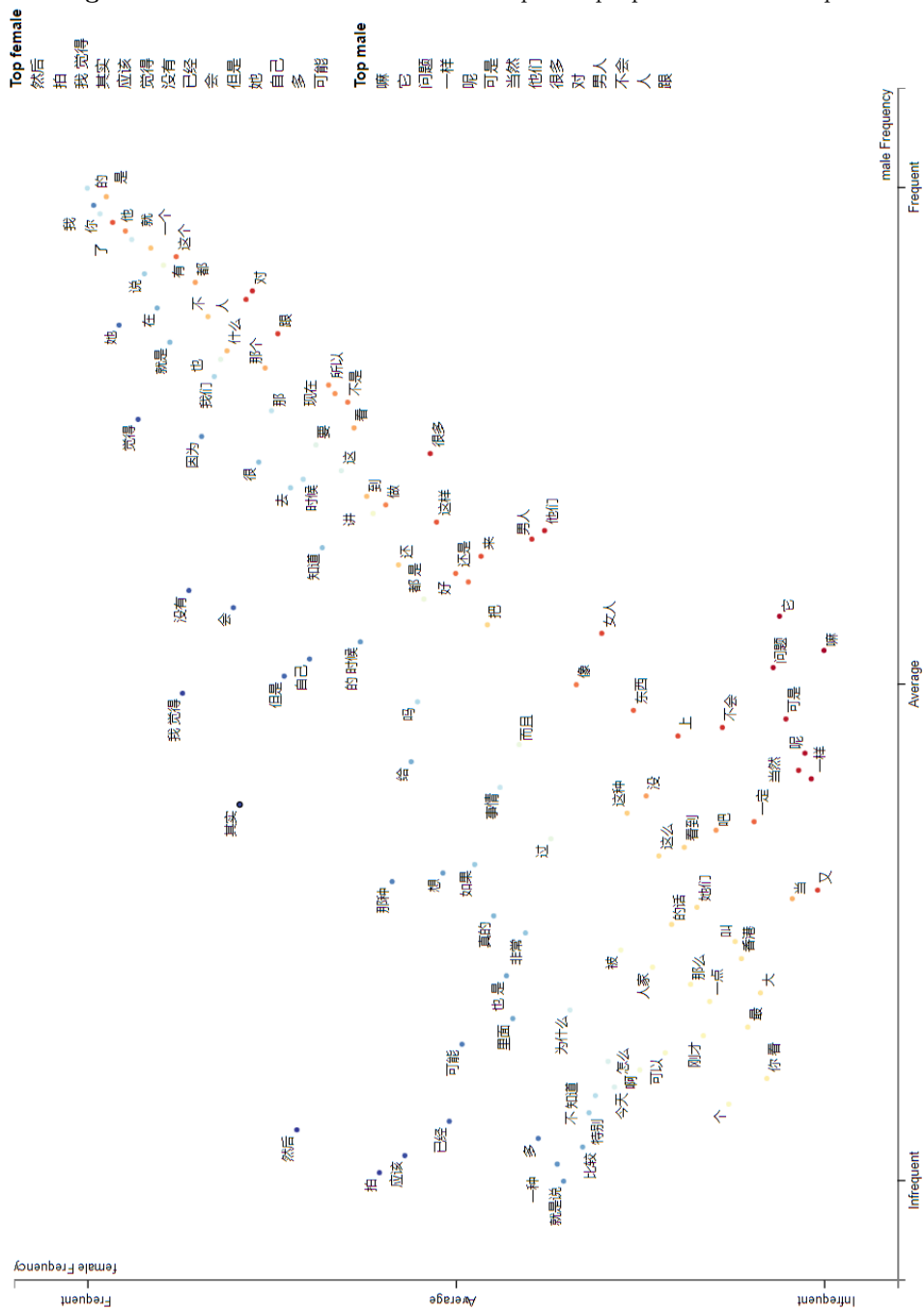
As a genderless language, gender is not grammatically marked in Mandarin. Although Mandarin has 她 and 他 to distinguish female and male, the masculine form of 他们 can be used to refer to both genders. In the above example, male speakers use the gendered term '男人' and '女人' to mark gender in the statement to show that high-heel shoes affect sexes differently. The use of these gender labels in discourse increases the salience of gender stereotyping that females wear high-heel to please male. However, clothing, as a gender performance, can be a way people present themselves [17]. For intersex or transgender people, wearing high-heel shoes may be a way to please themselves or their partners who can be either male or female.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the gender-related variations in the semi-institutional discourse in Mandarin Chinese. The results of this pilot study show that gender differences exist when women and men engage in similar topics. Particularly,



Fig. 3. Lexical difference in conversation topics of people and relationship



we are interested in the turn-taking and lexical and phrasal features in cross-gender conversations. We observed that female speakers tend to produce more and longer turns when conversational topics are about people and relationships whereas males are more talkative when discussing leisure activities and social and political issues.

Considering the lexical and phrasal features, we found generational differences across binary gender groups. It is found that females use more hedges of various functions in all three topic areas than males. The result also suggested that male and female speakers tend to use more gendered terms when the conversational topics involved people and relationships. We hope this pilot study can contribute to a deeper understanding of gender-related variation in cross-gender conversation in the semi-institutional discourse.

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