WOMEN'S LANGUAGE BY MICHELLE OBAMA AND OPRAH WINFREY FROM THE OPRAH'S 2020 VISION TOUR INTERVIEW

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Abstract: Since the 19th century, it has been believed that women's language lacks certainty (Lakoff, 1973) and owns cooperative communication styles (Coates, 2004; Coates, 2015). To test these two hypotheses in high-status women's conversation, this sociolinguistic study used a descriptive qualitative method along with a quantitative method to examine the forms and functions of language features. To be specific, the researcher investigated Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey's language in the Oprah Winfrey 2020 Vision Tour's live talk show so as to determine the type of language used by high social status women along with its function. This study focused on four elements: lexical hedges, tag questions, interruptions, and back-channeling responses (Coates, 2015; Lakoff, 1973). The study found that both Winfrey and Obama communicated through their usage of the collaborative functions of the aforementioned elements, which supports Coates's (2004) theory on women's cooperative communication style. Lastly, the findings suggest that each linguistic element has a particular purpose depending on the situation's context and the speaker's aim. Due to the changes in women's roles and societal circumstances since the 17th century, it appears that additional research is required to enhance the researcher's conclusions.

Keywords: Woman's language feature, communication style, Vision tour, Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, the relationship between language and gender has been one of the primary concerns in sociolinguistics. Lakoff (1973), known as the pioneer of this field, claimed that while men's language was dominant and assertive, women's language was mostly associated with uncertainty and hesitation. Although the study was criticized for feminist bias, a lack of empirical data, and reliance on personal observation, Lakoff's theory about women's language has been perceived as the initial framework for future researchers.

Regarding linguistic forms, following Lakoff's theory, several research supporting Lakoff's theory on women's language claimed that women's language was characterized by a predominance of the following linguistic forms of tentative language: lexical hedges and fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, specialized vocabularies (precise color terms), intensifier, hypercorrect grammar, super polite form, avoidance of strong swear words and emphatic stress (Kartika & Rusnaningtias, 2017; Badari& Setyowati, 2019; Siregar & Suastra, 2020). However, some of this research looking at women's language shared a common methodological flaw: they all concentrated on the differences between men and women's language without considering other variables such as age, social status, ethnicity. In addition, they all focused on the frequency with which women employed these language forms rather than on their functions.

Apart from Lakoff's theory, in terms of communication style, it is believed that women own cooperative communication styles, while men own competitive communication styles (Coates, 2004; Coates, 2015; Tannen, 1993). However, since little research has been conducted to study high social status women's conversational strategies (Rohma, 2021), it is questionable whether this theory on women's communication style could be applied to same sex high social status women's conversations. Besides, few articles have investigated both language forms and communication styles in same

sex conversation (Kartika & Rusnaningtias, 2017). Due to these reasons, the researcher would like to investigate high social status women's language forms and communication styles in their same sex conversations.

The study aimed to investigate the types and functions of three tentative language features, namely lexical hedges, fillers and tag questions to examine the validity of her hypothesis on the function of tentative speech form (see more details in the literature review section). Besides, the researcher sought to explore Winfrey and Michelle's communication styles through the investigation of their use of interruptions and back-channeling responses.

2. Literature review

High social status women's use of tentative language

In the field of women's language, regarding language form, it was believed that women tended to use tentative language, which resulted from their lower status in society (Lakoff, 1973). Tentative language has been defined as a technique for downplaying a remark by making the speaker appear less direct and uncertain about his or her words (Lakoff, 1973). According to Lakoff, lexical hedges, fillers, and tag questions, the subjects of this research, are believed to belong to tentative language.

Regarding lexical hedges, hedges is a form of verbal filler that serves to soften the impact of a speech. Some researchers have investigated different functions and types of hedges. According to Lakoff, lexical hedges and fillers only expressed women's lack of confidence, which conflicted with some scholars' conclusions. In detail, based on pragmatic analysis, according to Holmes (1984) and Holmes (1986) hedge words like "you know," "I believe," and "kind of" might have one of two meanings: "modal meaning," which conveyed the speaker's conviction, and "emotional (social) meaning", which conveyed the speaker's attitude towards the interaction's addressee (Holmes, 1984, p.61). Other findings of some investigations

in some hedges such as "like", "well", "I mean" conducted by Amoto (2020) and Tree & Schrock (2002) could also illustrate that hedges were not only used to express uncertainty but also as facilitators to maintain conversation. However, these studies were mostly done in the context of men's and women's discourse; thus, the functions of lexical hedges were still undetermined in the context of high social status women.

Another tentative speech form that was worth analyzing was tag questions. A tag question is a question that is attached to an utterance. Similar to lexical hedges and fillers, while Lakoff asserted that the use of tag questions diminished the force of an assertion by making the speaker appear insecure, Holmes (1984) confirmed that tag questions can serve a variety of social functions in conversation directed at either the speaker or the address, rather than simply being an indicator of the speaker's lack of assertiveness. According to Holmes (1984), tag questions express two meanings: modal and affective meanings. On the one hand, tags with modal meaning, such as requesting confirmation, agreement, indicated speakers' hesitation and a demand for confirmation. On the other hand, "addressee-oriented" tags could be further differentiated into "facilitative" or "softening" tags, depending on the tag's goal. In contrast to 'softening' tags, which conveyed politeness or the speaker's concern for recipients' feelings, "facilitative" tags demonstrated the speaker's solidarity with a favorable attitude towards the recipient. Similarly, Holmes (1986), studying on men's and women's conversational usage of tag questions, also shared the same idea on the functions of tag questions with Holmes (1984).

There has been some research investigation on the use of tag questions among high social status women; nevertheless, these studies were either conducted in the context of a speech or concentrated on the frequency of linguistic elements rather than explaining the functions of tag questions (Badari & Setyowati, 2019; Siregar &Suastra, 2020; Wardani & Kristiani, 2017). Due to the scarcity of

research undertaken in the context of conversation, this study will examine the usage of tag questions by two high social status women in order to determine the function of this linguistic form.

High social status women's use of communication style

In the studies of women's language, apart from Lakoff's idea of women's language forms, Coates (2004) advanced another notion of women's communication style. According to Coates (2004), there are two types of communication styles: competitive communication style and cooperative communication style. While in a competitive conversation, participants attempted to grab their conversation wheels and fight for their status; participants in a collaborative conversation built on one another's good ideas, assisted other speakers and used language to highlight their solidarity with the other participant. In order to study high social status women's communication styles, the researcher examined two conversation strategies, namely back-channel responses and interruptions.

Interruptions occurred when an interactant began speaking before the present speaker had finished his turn (James & Clarke, 1993). Regarding types of interruptions, Ferguson (1977, as cited in Beattie, 1982) categorized interruptions into four types: simple interruption, overlapping interruption, butting in interruption, and silent interruption. In terms of interruption functions, interruptions were frequently regarded as competitive, as they were assumed to involve a high probability of dominance. However, there was no firm evidence to indicate that the interruption constituted a dominance attempt. Many other researchers found that interruptions frequently had a supportive or cooperative function in conversation. Murata (1994) mentioned two functions: cooperative and intrusive interruption. Later on, based on Murata's theory, Kennedy and Camden (1983) provided three more sub functions in cooperative interruption, which are agreement, assistance, clarification and four subfunctions of intrusive interruption, which include disagreement, floor taking, topic change and tangentialization.

Recent research has shown contradictory results in women's use of interruption. While Rohmah (2021), who explored the types and functions of Hilary Clinton's interruptions in presidential debates, revealed that Hilary avoids interruptions, the results of women's domination in Faizah and Kurrniawan (2016) illustrated that female speakers showed a higher frequency of interruptions than the male ones in Mata Najwa talk-show. The contradiction in the aforementioned findings demonstrated that the study of interruptions should be contextualized in terms of the setting of the study and the speakers' social status.

In contrast to interruptions, a backchannel response was defined as one in which the speaker did not attempt to seize control of the floor but rather gave context for the interlocutor's comment (e.g., "mm," "yeah," etc). Adopting theories proposed by Maynard (1997), Heinz (2003) examined the disparities between backchannel responses in the United States and Germany. Verbal and nonverbal backchannel reactions could be classified by Heinz (2003) into two distinct types of backchannel responses. The verbal backchannel reaction of a listener could take the form of a lexical item, word, phrase, or even a complete sentence. Non-verbal backchannel responses, on the other hand, were those elicited by the use of facial expressions, gestures, and motions such as head nods, head shakes, shoulder shrugs, and eye gazes.

Numerous studies have been undertaken to determine how men and women use backchannels. According to Coates (2015), women used backchannel to indicate their active listening and support for one another. Additionally, female speakers used backchannel to convey their acceptance of certain stages of a discourse, such as accepting a new topic or acknowledging a topic's conclusion. However, little research has been conducted to study high social status women's usage of backchannel responses. Therefore, in order to comprehend the use of backchannel responses as well as to determine the communication styles of Obama and Winfrey, the research would

investigate the types and functions of backchannel responses employed in their conversation.

Research questions

Based on Lakoff's model, the researcher investigated Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey's language in their same sex conversation to examine the validity of her hypothesis on the function of tentative speech form. Due to the researcher's time and resource constraints as well as the fact that there are different views on the functions of lexical hedges, fillers and tag questions, the researcher focused exclusively on these three linguistic forms. Thus, the study sought to answer the following question:

- *Which type of language did Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama employ in the Oprah Winfrey's 2020 Vision talk show?*

In terms of communication style, it is believed that women own cooperative communication styles, while men own competitive communication style (Coaste, 2004; Coaste, 2015; Tannen, 1993). Little research has been conducted to study high social status women's conversational strategies (Rohma, 2021). Thus, further investigation in high social status women language is required to examine this hypothesis. To gain a complete understanding of this subject, the research attempted to answer the following question:

- *Which type of communication style do Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey use in the Oprah Winfrey's 2020 Vision talk show?*

3. Methodology

With the aim of examining the usage of both linguistic forms and conversational strategies by Obama and Winfrey, this study adopted a descriptive qualitative method with the assistance of quantitative tools. The researcher employed this approach to give a detailed description of the participants' usage of language forms and conversational strategies in the chosen data. Meanwhile, a quantitative

approach was adopted to measure the frequency of the use of each conversational strategy. Besides, this study employed conversation analysis (CA) to examine the interactional processes that happened during Winfrey's live talk show with Obama on her 2020 Vision Tour. Conversation Analysis was used since it is capable of elucidating and describing the types and functions of selected conversational techniques used during a talk show interview.

Oprah Winfrey's 2020 Vision Tour's live talk show with Obama was selected as the object of the research as talk shows had rarely been chosen to be analyzed before. Since the video was set unscripted, the use of linguistic features was authentic and realistic. Winfrey and Obama were chosen to be the participants of the study as they were considered two high social status women. Michelle Obama was the first African American first lady and the wife of Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States. According to Forbes Magazine's yearly list of the world's most powerful women, she was believed to be the most powerful woman in the world. Winfrey was an American television personality, actress, and entrepreneur, best known for her syndicated daily talk show, which was one of the genre's most popular. Besides, she also became one of the richest and most influential women in the United States (Britannica, 2022).

Data collection and Analysis

In order to analyze the types and functions of lexical hedges, fillers, tag questions, interruptions and backchanneling responses, various theoretical frameworks have been employed. Here is the list of theoretical frameworks adopted in the research:

▪ Lexical hedges: theories on the functions of some hedges adapted from Holmes (1984), Holmes (1986), Tsukamoto (2020), Tree and Schrock (2002), Macaulay (2005).

  ・ Functions of "I think", "You know", "Sort of/kind of" (Holmes, 1984)

・Function of "You know" (Holmes, 1986)

・Function of "like" (Tsukamoto, 2020)

・Function of "I mean" (Tree & Schorck, 2002)

・Function of "Well" (Macaulay, 2005)

▪ Tag questions:theories on the functions of tag questions proposed by Holmes (1984)

▪ Interruptions:Ferguson's (1977, as cited in Beattie, 1982) theory on classification of interruptions, Murata (1994) and Kennedy and Camden's (1983) theory on functions of interruptions.

▪ Backchanneling responses: Maynard's (1997) theories on function of Backchanneling responses.

To analyze the data of the study, the researcher used a textual analysis approach along with quantitative analysis. A textual analysis is a technique for assessing the meaning of verbal or nonverbal cues included within certain texts (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). Thus, textual analysis was employed to identify and evaluate linguistic indicators associated with lexical hedges, tag questions, interrupts, and backchannel responses used by Obama and Winfrey in this research. Furthermore, a quantitative method is employed to determine the dominance of language used by both speakers by counting the frequency of language elements used by Obama and Winfrey. Besides, contexts were used to deduce the functions of the four above-mentioned linguistic features.

4. Findings and Discussions

Question 1: Which type of language did Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama employ in the Oprah Winfrey 2020 Vision Tour talk show?

Regarding the analysis of lexical hedges, the researcher categorizedlexical hedges by function in Table 1.1 following this

principle: lexicalhedges used to express hesitation and uncertainty are classified as tentative language, those that are hearer-oriented and interactional are considered facilitators.

Table 1.1: Classification on functions of lexical hedges

	Lexical Hedges/ Fillers	Functions	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage (%)
Facilitators	You know	Expressing confidence(affective meaning)	28.19	35.59
	I think/ I believe/ I feel	expressing certainty and adding weight to the proposition (deliberative)	4.03	
	well	Agreement	0.69	
		Response	2.68	
Tentative function	You know	Expressing uncertainty(modal meaning)	30.2	42.27
	Like	Express uncertainty (modal meaning)	6.71	
	I think/ I believe/ I feel	Express uncertainty and softening the force of proposition (tentative)	2.01	
	I mean	Express uncertainty concerning the choice of words	1.34	
	sort of/kind of	lexical imprecision signal (express uncertainty)	2.01	
Ambiguous	Like	Describe utterances/ feelings in the past	9.4	16.1
		A kind of stuffing or switcher	2.68	
		Give examples	1.34	
	sort of/kind of	softening devices	268	
Total			**100**	**100**

In Table 1.1, it is apparent that the use of tentative function (42.27%) surpassed the use of facilitative one (35.59%). Other undetermined functions account for 16,1% of the total. These four undefined functions, which includes (1) describing utterances in the past, (2) a kind of stuffing and switcher, (3) giving examples and (4) softening devices. The first three functions are neither speaker-oriented nor hearer-oriented and do not indicate speakers' uncertainty. Thus, it is believed that they do not belong to any categorization. Regarding the function of softening devices, it was not possible to determine their meaning since it is unknown if she used it to appear more approachable or to show her insecurity about herself. Thus, it was impossible for the researcher to classify it into either of two categories.

The analysis of the functions of tag questions was conducted in accordance with Holmes' (1984) theory. To be more precise, tag questions served three functions: modal tags (signal speakers' request for confirmation), facilitative tags (express speakers' solidarity with the addressee), and softening tags (convey politeness). Based on this theory, the data in Table 1.2 below detail how Obama and Winfrey's use of tag questions.

Table 1.2: Functions of tag questions by Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey

Tag questions	Functions	Michelle Obama	Oprah Winfrey	Total	Percentage
right	Facilitative tags	8	2	10	91
	Modal tags	0	1	1	9
Total		**8**	**3**	**11**	**100**

From Table 1.2, it could be seen that the only form of tag question used in the conversation was the word "right". In general, both speakers mostly used tag questions as a positive politeness strategy (91%), which is to encourage the addressee to contribute to the conversation.

The above-mentioned outcome reveals that the function of hedges and tag questions was to express insecurity, which was consistent with Lakoff's claim that women's use of lexical hedges and tag questions was linked with unassertiveness. Nevertheless, contrary to Lakoff's assertion that this was a result of women's powerlessness, the researcher believed that Obama and Winfrey may have used unassertive language to look more approachable. In detail, in order to soften the force of utterance and avoid threatening Winfrey's face, Michelle frequently employed a number of lexical hedges. For instance, when she told Oprah that she knew some people admired her, she chose the lexical word "kind of'' to avoid boastful expressions. This is in line with Coaste's (1988) theory that women used hedges more than men to avoid face-threatening acts.

Besides, the findings also indicate another viewpoint that the function of hedges and tag questions was to support other speakers and emphasize solidarity with other speakers. In detail, both Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey used tag questions, with 90% utilizing a positive politeness strategy to encourage the addressee to participate in the conversation. Regarding hedges, besides tentative function, they could be used to denote speakers' proclivity for developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. For example, the use of "you know" by Michelle Obama was often used to mark the desire for the presence of shared experience and to decrease social distance, which is regarded as a type of face-saving act. This supports Coaste's (2015) claim that hedge and tag questions were used to respect the fact needs of all participants in women same-sex conversation.

Question 2: Which communication style did Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama employ in the Oprah Winfrey 2020 Vision Tour talk show?

Frequency of interruption

Regarding the frequency of interruptions employed by Obama and Winfrey, the data presented in Figure 1.1 illustrate that out of 20

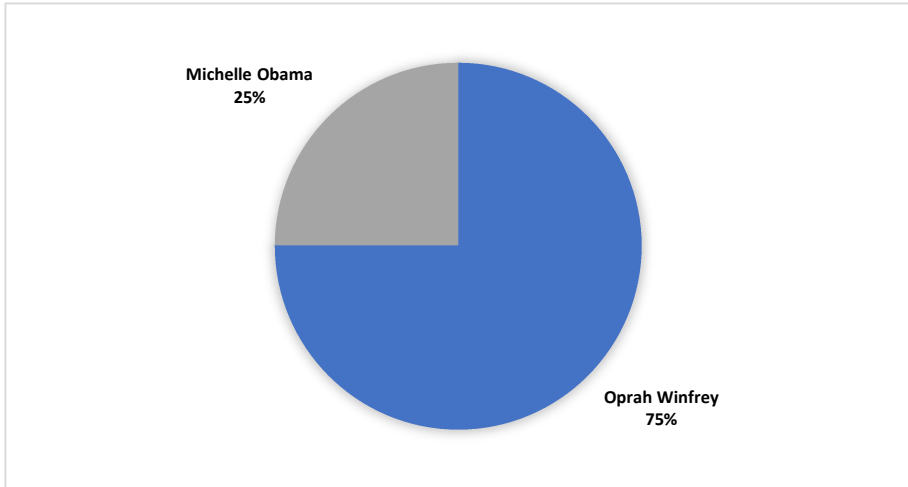interruptions, Winfrey made a higher frequency of interruptions (75%) compared to Obama (25%).

Figure 1.1: Frequency of interruptions used by Obama and Winfrey

The aforementioned results of the study indicate that Winfrey dominated the interruptions in the talk show (75%). However, when considering the success of interruptions, it was discovered that while Winfrey attempted more interruptions than Obama, Obama was able to take more floors than Winfrey. To be precise, while Winfrey was only successful in 5 of 9 attempts, Obama was successful in 3 of 4 attempts. Thus, the figure suggests that the likelihood that Obama made successful interruption attempts was higher than Winfrey did. As a result of this finding, I believe it is difficult to provide an exact answer to the question of who was more dominant.

Type of interruption

The analysis of the types of interruptions was conducted based on the theory proposed by Ferguson (1977, as cited in Beattie, 1982). In detail, there are four main types of interruptions: overlapping interruption, simple interruption, butting-in interruption and silent interruption. Following this theory, data related to the types of interruptions employed by Obama and Winfrey is presented in Table 1.3.
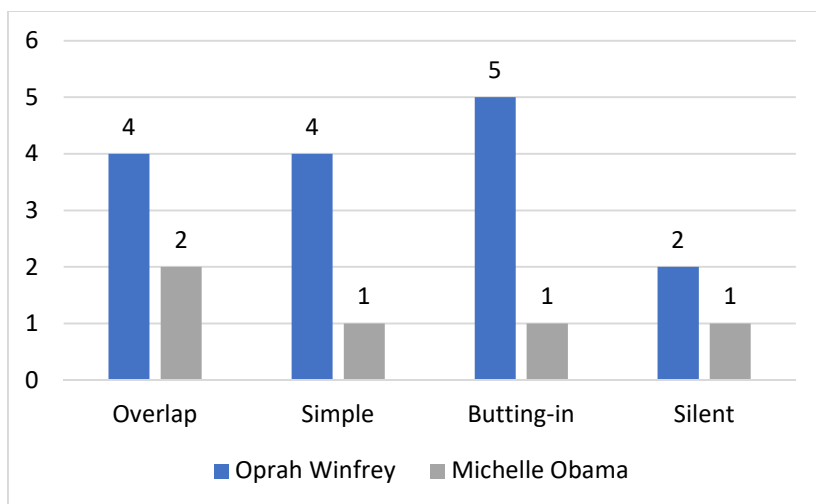
Figure 1.2: Types of interruptions employed by Obama and Winfrey

Though Winfrey's frequency of interruptions outnumbered Michelle's, both speakers applied four types of interruptions as shown in Figure 1.2. As can be seen, Winfrey's use of interruptions dominated all four types of interruptions. Besides, butting-in interruption was most frequently applied by both, while silent interruption was employed the least.

Function of interruptions

Regarding the purpose of interruptions, the theory of Murata (1994) and Kennedy & Camden Murata (1983) served as the foundation for the analysis. To be specific, interruptions serve two main functions (cooperative and intrusive) accompanied by seven sub functions (agreement, assistance, clarification, disagreement, floortaking, topic change and tangentalization). In accordance with this hypothesis, the functions of interruptions used by Obama and Winfrey are presented in this Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3 reveals that the functions of interruptions employed by both speakers tend to be more intrusive than collaborative. To be more specific, it is apparent that floor taking accounts for 42.8 percent (9 out of 20) of total functions, with Winfrey performing 40 percent of

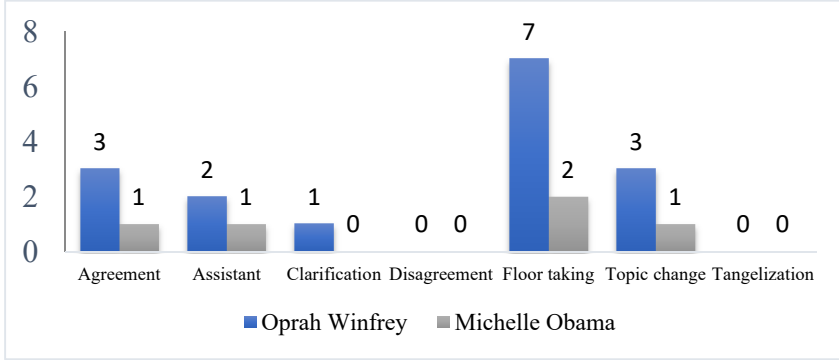them. Additionally, Winfrey outperformed Obama in all sub-functions.

Figure 1.3: Functions of interruptions employed by Obama and Winfrey

The aforementioned results relating to types and functions of interruptions indicated that the majority of Winfrey's interruptions tend to be more intrusive rather than collaborative. To be specific, with regards to types of interruption, Winfrey employed butting-in interruption the most. However, when examining the functions of this type of interruptions employed by Winfrey, the researcher found that the majority of them served cooperative functions. Most of the time, Winfrey expressed her agreement with Obama's previous idea by employing the backchannel lexical item "yeah". Thus, this could be an encouragement for Obama to keep taking the floor and continue talking. The example below is presented to illustrate this idea:

Example:

Michelle: That is a very hard thing to ***do-***

Winfrey: ***Yeah***

*Michelle: **And** everybody should understand that as a responsibility.*

Similarly, in terms of the function of interruption, though Winfrey most frequently used the intrusive function of floor taking (50,3%), when examining closely, the researcher found that Winfrey primarily used this function to express her opinion and make

constructive comments about topics Obama previously discussed. Here is an illustration to demonstrate this point:

Michelle: Y'all just have the same lips. It's like- (pause)

*Winfrey:**And** the same forehead,*

In this case, Obama and Winfrey shared the same opinion that everybody on the photo line looked alike. When Obama took a short pause, Winfrey took the floor to contribute to her previous idea that everyone in a photo line looked the same.

For this reason, the researcher believed that Winfrey's functions of butting in interruption and floor taking interruptions was cooperativeinstead of intrusive. Besides, since Obama avoided using interruptions, it is believed she also pursued cooperative communication style.

The pie chart showed the number of backchanneling responses used by Obama and Winfrey. It could be easily seen that Obama and Winfrey employed a fairly similar number of back-channeling responses in their conversation (30 times and 29 times respectively).
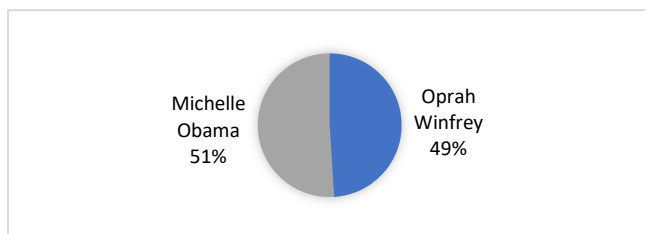

Figure 1.4: Frequency of backchanneling responses produced by Obama and Winfrey

Types and functions of back-channeling responses

To understand the different types and functions of backchanneling responses made by each speaker, the table below is presented to demonstrate this data:

Table 1.3: Types and functions of verbal backchannel responses
used by Obama and Winfrey

Functions	Forms	Michelle Obama	Oprah Winfrey	Total	Percentage (%)
Continuers	Yeah	1	3	4	15.25
	Mm-hmm	1	2	3	
	yes	0	1	1	
	uh-huh	1	0	1	
Display of understanding	yeah	3	5	8	16.95
	Yes	1	1	2	
Agreement	yeah	5	3	8	33.9
	That's right	1	0	1	
	Absolutely	1	0	1	
	yes	5	0	5	
	right	0	1	1	
	exactly	2	0	2	
	repeating last words	0	2	2	
Support and empathy	yeah	4	6	10	22.03
	Mm-hmm	1	0	1	
	yes	2	0	2	
Strong emotional response	Aw	1	2	3	6.78
	Oh God	1	0	1	
Minor addition and request for information	is it	0	1	1	5.09
	really	0	2	2	
Total		**30**	**29**	**59**	**100**

Based on the table above, all functions mentioned in Maynard's
(1997) theory were found in the conversation on Oprah Winfrey's
2020 Vision Tour's live talk show with Obama. To be specific, these
functions were continuers, displays of understanding, agreement,
support and empathy, strong emotional responses and minor addition

and request for information. Each of the six functions was used, with agreement being the most frequently used (33.9 %). Additionally, the most frequently occurring lexical word is "yeah" which serves four functions, including continuers, display of understanding, agreement, support, and empathy. These are in line with Uemtaso's findings on English backchanneling (2000, as cited in Cutrone, 2005). The finding also supports Coates's (2004) theory that women used backchannel to demonstrate active listening, support for another, and acceptance of another's viewpoints.

In general, from the above-mentioned results of the use of lexical hedges, tag questions, interruptions, backchanneling responses, it can be assumed that both Obama and Winfrey pursued cooperative communication styles, which is in line with the theory that women owned cooperative communication styles in same sex conversation (Coates, 2004; Coates, 2015, Zimmerman & West, 1975).

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to gain insights into the usage of tentative language and communication style employed by high social status women. Specifically, the focus was on the linguistic features of lexical hedges, fillers, and tag questions, as well as the broader communicationpatterns observed in the speech of Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama. The findings indicate that both Winfrey and Obama utilized these linguistic devices in line with the tentative function as proposed by Lakoff. They employed lexical hedges, fillers, and tag questions to express uncertainty or to soften the impact of their statements.

Interestingly, the researcher also identified a facilitating function of these linguistic features in the conversation of Winfrey and Obama. These devices were frequently used to maintain the flow of communication and to signal engagement with the other participants. In this sense, lexical hedges, fillers, and tag questions served as facilitators of interaction.

Examining the communication style of both speakers, the findings revealed that Winfrey and Obama adopted a cooperative approach. Theyemployed a significant number of hedges, tag questions, back-channeling responses, and interruptions as strategies to emphasize their solidarity with the other participant. These results align with the existing theoretical framework that suggests women tend to employ cooperative communication styles (Coaste, 2004; Coaste, 2015; Tannen, 1993) in conversations involving high social status women.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of how high social status women utilize tentative language and adopt cooperative communication styles. The findings support the theoretical perspectives on women's communication patterns and provide empirical evidence from the speech of Winfrey and Obama. By shedding light on these linguistic and communicative features, this research expands our knowledge of the intricacies of communication practices among influential women in society.

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