
Women's Language Features in Female Characters the Secret Of Moonacre Movie: a Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract

This research explores the relationship between language functions and women's language features in conversations among female characters in the film *The Secret of Moonacre*. Using a qualitative content analysis of transcripts, it applies Lakoff's model of women's language and Jakobson's language functions (as cited in Juanda, 2022). Seven features of women's language were identified and quantified: lexical hedges (23%), rising intonation on declaratives (13%), superpolite forms (16%), empty adjectives (13%), tag questions (10%), avoidance of strong swear words (13%), and emphatic stress (10%). The results indicate that these linguistic features and functions play a significant role in shaping interpersonal relationships; appropriate word choice and function use can enhance conversational effectiveness and strengthen social bonds. The study contributes to sociolinguistics by showing how women's language characteristics and language functions interrelate in film dialogue, offering insights into gendered communication in mediated contexts.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic, Women's Language Features, Language Function, *The Secret of Moonacre*

A. INTRODUCTION

Language is a mirror of society, reflecting cultural norms and gendered patterns of communication. The relationship between language and gender is complex. Gender influences many aspects of social life, including linguistic behaviour. Gender, as a sociocultural construct, is a classification that determines one's status, roles, and actions in a community, beyond the simple biological classification or physical look. Gender is an appropriate measure for differentiating individuals in terms of their sociocultural behaviors, as Holmes argues. This social division is clearly seen in "gendered language," which comprises certain pronouns, titles, and forms of address that actively represent and reinforce societal norms and expectations. Consequently, men and women have very different linguistic features and speech styles. While men tend to use language as a tool for negotiating status and to convey information, women often use language to build connections, rapport, and intimacy with others (Hamzah, 2025).

Sociolinguistics focuses on how language interacts with social situations and contexts; it is the most effective lens through which to analyze these processes. According to Meyerhoff (2018), sociolinguistics plays a vital role in unpacking how language can either reinforce or actively challenge gender stereotypes across various forms of popular media, particularly film. The foundational framework for identifying women's language features traces back to Robin Lakoff's theory. Lakoff asserted that men are cross-culturally socialized to speak assertively, maturely, and clearly using precise vocabulary, whereas women are often conditioned to be less assertive. Women's speech is frequently characteristic of figurative language, hesitation, and a more refined, polite vocabulary designed to preserve social harmony. Lakoff identified 10 features, "women's language," to represent these unique communicative indicators.

Lakoff's theory of ten features of women's language is lexical hedges or fillers, tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, empty adjectives, precise color terms, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, superpolite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. Beyond merely identifying these structural forms, understanding why they are deployed requires mapping them against broader linguistic functions. According to Roman Jakobson (as cited in Juanda, 2022), communication serves specific structural purposes classified into six core categories: the emotive/expressive function, the directive/conative function, the referential function, the metalinguistic function, the poetic function, and the phatic function.

The existence of these female language features continues to be proven today in the media, such as in film dialogues. Film dialogues offer a rich, concentrated reflection of natural contemporary interaction, serving as an ideal data source for sociolinguistic inquiry. This study selects the fantasy-drama film *The Secret of Moonacre* 2008 directed by Gabor Csupo, written by Lucy Shuttleworth and Anna Kokotos, and adapted from Elizabeth Goudge's novel *The Little White Horse*.

Despite extensive research on women's language, there remains a gap in understanding of its manifestations, particularly in film, when a female speaker is in a state of intense psychological trauma, high conflict, and sudden leadership. Although previous research has explored women's language in various conversational contexts, few studies have specifically focused on the linguistic nuances of a female protagonist who combines an unusual level of courage and self-confidence with self-defense mechanisms related to her inner vulnerability. The lack of focused research in this subject means that we are unable to understand how women's language works when it goes beyond the limits of usual politeness and respect. Films are dense with dialogue, and the accuracy of the dialogue is an interesting opportunity for analysis in the way that researchers can track how meaningful but limited conversations reflect character transformation. However, the literature has hardly documented how classic feminine linguistic traits are modified, abandoned, or strategically used in a narrative setting driven by conflict.

Furthermore, recent research often focuses on modern, informal digital media formats, thereby overlooking the complex power dynamics that emerge in more structured, narrative-driven traditional formats. Sociolinguistic research currently studies how women use language in informal situations to strengthen conversational connections and value temporary relational harmony rather than assertiveness. However, the focus on digital environments of collaboration and peer-to-peer interactions often minimizes how women use their authority and respond to serious family or community crises. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the linguistic features of female characters in the fantasy drama film *The Secret of Moonacre* and then contributes to the general discourse on gendered language and its strategic adaptation within high-pressure, non-collaborative narrative contexts.

The importance of this research lies in its potential to offer insight into more general social norms and expectations regarding gender, power, and crisis communication. Study the linguistic features of female languages in *The Secret of Moonacre* and gain insight into how a female speaker negotiates her identity when confronted with overlapping historical difficulties and deep-seated community friction. This study is particularly relevant as the media representation of female leaders is subject to severe review, and feminine speech is often misrepresented as a sign of weakness. Understanding how a female character communicates in high-stakes settings can reveal the true complexity of speech patterns that are simultaneously shaped by personal trauma, cultural expectations, and the demands of leadership. This research contributes to sociolinguistics by showing how women's language characteristics and language functions interrelate in film dialogue, offering insights into gendered communication in mediated contexts.

The Secret of Moonacre provides an extraordinarily compelling case study for gendered sociolinguistics. The narrative arc and conversational landscape of the female protagonist directly mirror the complex emotional barriers, family conflicts, and self-discovery faced by modern youth. Driven by a strong sense of loss and solitude, the main character talks with an unusual level of boldness and confidence, but she remains defensive about her deeper weaknesses and past traumas. This intense, self-focused communication style eventually causes friction, leading her to ignore the overlapping difficulties within her newfound family history and community. Analyzing her conversation provides a unique research chance to see how common feminine language traits are modified, abandoned, or weaponized when a female character is put into a position of high-stakes conflict and leadership.

The purpose of this research is to explicitly evaluate how women's language features are used and the function of language. To achieve this objective, this research addresses the following two research questions:

- 1) What women's language features are used in the film *The Secret of Moonacre*?
- 2) What is the function of the use of women's language features in the film *The Secret of Moonacre*?

This research focuses on various features of women's language found in the movie, as well as the functions served by the use of those features, with the theory of Robin Lakoff about ten features of women's language. The data for this analysis were drawn from the movie titled "*The Secret of Moonacre*," which was uploaded to the YHJ Horizon YouTube channel.

B. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach integrated with qualitative content analysis, a framework highly suited for examining sociolinguistic phenomena within textual and dialogic frameworks. In contrast to quantitative methodologies that rely on statistical metrics to interpret empirical phenomena, qualitative research preserves the integrity of verbal and textual symbols without converting them into numerical data. Instead, it utilizes the descriptive language of both participants and researchers to articulate and contextualize the phenomenon under investigation. This methodological framework is systematically executed through distinct phases of data collection, analytical processing, and interpretation, all of which are anchored in the theoretical paradigms established within the literature review.

The primary subject of this research is the film *The Secret of Moonacre* 2008. To establish clear data boundaries, the corpus is strictly limited to the spoken utterances of the primary and secondary female characters, specifically selected using a purposive sampling technique based on

their interactional relevance to the film's patriarchal narrative structures. By classification dialogue based on Lakoff's theory of women's language, the research identifies the frequency of hedges, tag questions, and emphatic stress, etc. These linguistic choices are then cross-referenced with the characters' language function and emotional arcs to determine their communicative intent. Ultimately, the research aims to uncover whether the film's portrayal of female speech reinforces traditional gender stereotypes or offers a more nuanced representation of female agency.

Data collection involved sourcing the film from YouTube, conducting multiple comprehensive viewings to grasp narrative contexts, and producing verbatim orthographic transcripts of the female characters' dialogue. into a text document. Finally, this data is systematically classified and analysed by features, frequency, and language function to provide a comprehensive overview of the relationship between women's language features and the function of language that influences them in the movie. From this process, a total of 30 data utterances containing distinct female language features were isolated as the final data set for comprehensive analysis.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The classification is based on ten women's language features, and is sorted based on the most frequent features from the women's talk in the object of study. The source data of this study, namely, the movie *The Secret of Moonacre* (TSOM).

Table 1. Features and Language Function

No	Data	Features	Function
1.	"I think I'd know it again if I saw it"	Lexical Hedges	Expressive
2.	"Can't you see? There! Look! She's showing us. She took the pearls."	Rising intonation on declaratives	Expressive
3.	"Thank you, darling Serena"	Superpolite forms	Phatic
4.	"Good night, Uncle. Charmed, I'm sure."	Empty Adjectives	Phatic
5.	"You saw something, didn't you? "	Tag Question	Directive and Phatic
6.	"Yes. Yes, and she's showing me where she hid them."	Emphatic Stress	Expressive
7.	"Maria! Good gracious! Where's your self-restraint?"	Avoidance of Strong Swear Words	Expressive and Directive

1. Lexical Hedges

"I think I'd know it again if I saw it."

[TSOM/1.08.25]

In the data 1 is “I think” is a prominent lexical hedge. This phrase conveys uncertainty and serves to soften the sentence and express humility. The phrase “I think” is used by Maria Merryweather in a conversation with her governess, Miss Heliotrope. By prefacing her statement with “I think,” Maria Merryweather explicitly indicates a lack of complete certainty, protecting herself from potential face-threatening situations if she happens to be wrong. Furthermore, this specific hedge reflects the speaker's limited confidence in her own knowledge base. In the context of her conversation with her governess, Miss Heliotrope, the hedge also carries a social dimension; it softens the tone of the assertion, projecting an attitude of deference and humility that aligns with the traditional power dynamic between a young charge and her educator.

The language function of the lexical hedge “I think” in the phrase is primarily the expressive function. The phrase “I think” conveys the speaker’s personal attitude or feeling of uncertainty about the statement. It shows that Maria Merryweather is not stating something as an absolute fact but rather as her personal belief or opinion. From an expressive standpoint, “I think” shifts the utterance away from being purely informational (referential) and focuses it on the speaker’s internal psychological state. It externalizes Maria’s personal attitude, self-doubt, and cognitive processing, framing the recollection as an intuitive belief rather than an undeniable reality. However, looking deeper into the interaction, this hedge also serves an essential interpersonal. Because Maria is speaking to Miss Heliotrope, an authority figure, stating “*I know it again*” could sound overly defiant or dangerously arrogant. By substituting “*know*” with the hedged “*I think*,” Maria manages rapport, reduces the assertiveness of her claim, and leaves room for dialogue. It functions as a conversational safety valve that signals respect for the listener's authority while still allowing Maria to voice her personal perspective.

1. Rising intonation on declaratives

“Can't you see? **There!(↗)** **Look!(↗)** She's showing us. She took the pearls.”

[TSOM/1.07.58]

The data 2 exemplifies the women's language feature of rising intonation on declaratives, where Maria applies an upward pitch contour to her urgent observations during a critical moment of revelation regarding the Moon Pearls. By inflecting her voice upward at the end of “**There!(↗)**” and “**Look!(↗)**”, Maria subverts the authoritative, downward-falling intonation typically associated with direct commands or assertions, thereby mitigating the aggressive illocutionary force of her utterance. Sociolinguistic rising pitch transforms an otherwise demanding imperative into a collaborative, validation-seeking appeal, framing her discovery as an invitation for shared perception rather than an imposition of absolute epistemic authority. By using this interrogative-like inflection on non-questions, Maria effectively cushions the potential face-threatening act of directing her companions' attention, actively seeking immediate visual consensus and reassurance from her interlocutors in a way that prioritizes interactional alignment over rigid dominance.

The language function of the rising intonation on declaratives in the phrase “**There! Look!**” is an expressive function. The rising intonation expresses Maria Merryweather’s heightened emotional involvement, excitement, or urgency. It conveys her eagerness to draw attention to something important. The upward modulation of her pitch dynamically signals a shift from passive observation to active, high-stakes discovery, effectively compelling her audience to register her eagerness. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this aligns with Holmes theory, affective dimension of speech. Maria uses this emotionally charged intonation to bridge the gap between her individual

perception and her group's collective awareness, maximizing solidarity and demanding immediate, shared visual alignment in a moment of intense narrative climax.

2. Superpolite forms

"Thank you, darling Serena"

[TSOM/1.11.14]

The data 3 is "Thank you", which indicates a superpolite form. This dialogue is spoken by Maria using a polite and gentle tone of voice when saying the word. The purpose of this feature is to maintain harmony and show appreciation to the person being spoken to. By pairing the ritualistic politeness of "Thank you" with the endearing modifier "darling," Maria completely strips her speech of any aggressive or authoritative edge. This demonstrates an innate adherence to polite language structures, showcasing how feminine language utilizes soft lexical choices to project a nurturing, benevolent persona and establish peaceful interactions with the surrounding world.

The language function of the superpolite form "Thank you" in this phrase is primarily the phatic function. The use of "Thank you" helps to maintain social harmony and positive interpersonal relations. It acts as a social ritual to acknowledge kindness or a favor, thereby strengthening the social bond between Maria and Serena. Concurrently, the affective function is heavily amplified by the modifier "darling," which serves to minimize social distance, express warmth, and actively cultivate an atmosphere of mutual trust and solidarity. Within the larger narrative context of the film, this refined use of language allows Maria to establish a harmonious alliance with the natural world, reinforcing her identity as a compassionate leader who resolves conflicts through relational empathy rather than force.

3. Empty Adjectives

*"Good night, Uncle. **Charmed**, I'm sure."*

[TSOM/14.06]

The data 4 exemplifies the feminine language feature identified as an empty adjective. This is used to indicate social politeness and emotional agreement, but does not provide any substantial descriptive information. Maria uses it not because she literally feels "enchanted," but because it is considered an 'appropriate' and "sweet" word for a young girl from the upper social class to say. Maria does not utilize the word "Charmed" because she literally feels enchanted by her cold, uninviting uncle or her bleak surroundings in the tower room. Rather, the adjective operates as a formulaic token of her upper-class Victorian upbringing and gender socialisation. By using a word stripped of literal semantic weight, Maria satisfies the societal expectations placed upon a young, well-bred girl to remain pleasant, agreeable, and "sweet," thereby demonstrating how empty adjectives are frequently deployed to perform gendered etiquette rather than to convey genuine internal states.

The language function of the empty adjective phrase "Charmed, I'm sure" is a phatic function. Because the word "Charmed" is used as a conventional, polite expression to fulfill social expectations and to show courtesy towards the Uncle. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this satisfies the dimensions of status and formality; the language does not seek to build deep emotional solidarity, but rather to establish a baseline of civil distance and mutual respect within the domestic hierarchy. The empty adjective effectively keeps the peace, satisfying social decorum while allowing Maria to withdraw from an uncomfortable confrontation gracefully. This utterance occurs immediately after Sir Benjamin exercises his patriarchal authority by dismissively exiling Maria to the isolated tower room. Instead of reacting with overt defiance or passive-aggressive silence—which would breach Victorian social codes—Maria uses "Charmed" as a formulaic closing ritual to safely terminate the communicative channel.

4. Tag Question

*"You saw something, **didn't** you?"*

[TSOM/44.04]

The data 5 is "didn't you?" at the end of the sentence is a tag question. Because it follows a direct statement such as "You saw something," adding "didn't you?" changes the statement into one that seeks confirmation or avoids sounding too forceful. In this scene, Loveday suspects that Maria has witnessed the mystical white horse, which is a highly guarded secret of the valley. Rather than leveling a blunt, aggressive accusation at Maria, Loveday strategically utilizes the grammatical tag to downgrade the assertiveness of her deduction. This structural softening transforms what would be an imposing interrogation into a tentative, dialogic invitation for mutual verification, showcasing how female characters use specific syntactic structures to hedge their certainty and invite collaboration.

The language function of the tag question "didn't you?" in the phrase "You saw something, didn't you?" is primarily directive with a secondary phatic element. The directive function is evident because the speaker is seeking confirmation or a response, effectively prompting the listener to agree or provide information. Because Loveday and Maria have just met, the social distance between them is initially high. A raw command would alienate Maria; thus, the tag softens the face-threatening nature of the intrusive question, attempting to build quick solidarity over a shared mystical experience. Although Loveday is the elder and possesses deeper knowledge of the valley's magic, her emotional vulnerability prevents her from using a dominant, authoritative register. By utilizing this hybrid directive-affective mechanism, Loveday injects urgency into her inquiry while simultaneously maintaining essential conversational harmony. The tag question allows her to aggressively probe for vital information while ensuring that the fragile interpersonal channel with the young protagonist is not broken by excessive force.

5. Emphatic Stress

*"Yes. **Yes**, and she's showing me where she hid them."*

[TSOM/1.08.11]

The data 6 is "Yes" and contains emphatic stress. The repetition of "Yes" here serves to convince her interlocutor (and herself) of the truth of her mystical vision. It is a way of putting pressure on a statement without using harsh words. That women often place extra emphasis on certain words to reinforce meaning or show emotional involvement. By repeating "Yes" with explicit acoustic emphasis, Maria elevates a basic baseline agreement into an unassailable declaration of truth concerning her mystical vision. This linguistic doubling operates as both an internal and external mechanism of persuasion: it places conversational pressure on her listeners to believe her, while simultaneously reinforcing her own psychological certainty, illustrating how feminine speech utilizes intonational weight to project authority gracefully.

The language function of the emphatic stress in the repetition of "Yes. Yes," in the phrase is an expressive function. The expressive function is highlighted because the repetition and emphasis convey strong emotion, conviction, and urgency. Maria is emotionally involved and wants to reinforce the truthfulness of her statement. By emphasizing "Yes," she not only convinces the listener but also affirms her own certainty and emotional commitment to what she is saying. The vocal intensity here acts as a direct conduit for Maria's excitement during a high-stakes supernatural revelation. By layering her speech with this high level of expressive certainty, she not only validates the extraordinary nature of her vision to herself but also actively commands the emotional alignment and immediate trust of her skeptical interlocutors.

6. Avoidance of Strong Swear Words

*"Maria! **Good gracious!** Where's your self-restraint?"*

[TSOM/00.17.50]

The data 7 is "Good gracious" this is belonged to avoidance of strong swear words feature. frequently relies on polite, traditional exclamations to express shock. Women are systematically socialized to adopt milder, euphemistic substitutes often referred to as "soft expletives" such as goodness, heavens, or gracious to express shock, anger, or frustration. This choice directly suppresses the use of vulgar, coarse, or blasphemous language, which is historically permitted in dominant male registers. When Maria reacts with open indignation to her uncle confiscating her inheritance, Miss Heliotrope immediately attempts to diffuse the situation. Rather than utilizing harsh or aggressive reprimands, she channels her panic through the socially sanitized exclamation "Good gracious!" This linguistic selection underscores her deeply ingrained commitment to upper-class Victorian decorum and feminine refinement, demonstrating how female speakers use sanitized vocabulary to maintain a non-threatening, morally proper conversational stance even during moments of high domestic anxiety.

The language function of this utterance operates as a sophisticated hybrid of the expressive and directive functions of language. The phrase “Good gracious!” serves an expressive function by acting as an immediate acoustic pipeline for Miss Heliotrope's internal psychological state of alarm, worry, and disbelief at Maria's lack of compliance. Concurrently, the subsequent question, “Where's your self-restraint?”, serves an indirect directive function; it is not a literal inquiry about location, but a polite, urgent command for Maria to immediately suppress her emotional outburst and conform to behavioral expectations. As a governess, Miss Heliotrope holds educational and behavioral authority over Maria, yet she occupies a vulnerable, dependent socio-economic position within Sir Benjamin's patriarchal household. By modeling swear-free, hypercorrect language, she structurally enforces the behavioral boundaries Maria must adopt to survive within this rigid hierarchy. Because Miss Heliotrope possesses a deep, maternal affection for Maria, she deliberately avoids harsh, alienating commands or direct insults. The soft expletive allows her to execute a necessary social correction while preserving their close interpersonal bond and emotional alignment. Ultimately, the language function here is designed to regulate behavior and maintain surface-level harmony, demonstrating how women use non-aggressive verbal discipline to shield loved ones from friction within a volatile domestic ecosystem.

D. CONCLUSION

Through the perspective of sociolinguistics, this research explored the women's language features and the function of language with a focus on the female characteristics in the movie *The Secret of Moonacre*. The result of this research only 7 out of 10 features are heavily influenced by the narrative setting and the character development within *The Secret of Moonacre*. In the film's early acts, features such as lexical hedges, rising intonation, and tag questions are heavily concentrated in the speech of Miss Heliotrope and an initially displaced Maria Merryweather, reflecting the oppressive weight of Victorian domestic expectations and the internalized linguistic submissiveness demanded within patriarchal spaces like Moonacre Manor. However, as Maria transitions into her mythological role as the Moon Princess, a stylistic divergence occurs: the frequent deployment of emphatic stress, superpolite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and intensifiers shifts from emotional vulnerability to projecting rhetorical agency, resilience, and moral authority. Furthermore, the deliberate scripting omission of the remaining three features, such as precise color terms and empty adjectives, prevents the female characters from falling into archaic, superficial gender tropes, resulting in a balanced portrayal that authentically bridges female strength and structural vulnerability within a fantasy-adventure context.

Regarding the communicative intent of the dialogue, the empirical data reveal that the female characters consistently prioritize the expressive and phatic functions of language over a strictly data-driven, referential transmission of information to challenge the dominant patriarchal order. The phatic function is strategically operationalized through formulaic greetings, honorifics, and stylized politeness, serving as an interactional shield for Miss Heliotrope and Loveday to safely navigate volatile domestic hierarchies and defuse structural friction without triggering defensive male pushback. Concurrently, the expressive function transforms into an ideological catalyst during high-stakes narrative turning points, channelled through dramatic intonational shifts and emphatic repetitions. Maria utilizes emotionally transparent speech to directly confront the rigid, pride-fuelled, and directive-heavy communication styles of Sir Benjamin and Coeur de Noir. Ultimately, by leading with relationship-driven and emotionally authentic language functions, the women of Moonacre successfully leverage their distinct verbal styles to foster cross-clan empathy, cultivate subaltern solidarity, and dissolve the centuries-old generational curse of

the valley, converting historically marginalized speech patterns into the ultimate mechanism of narrative redemption.

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