

# Gender Distribution of Negative Judgements

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This paper examines how negative judgements are distributed across gender. A negative judgement is defined as a speech act in which the overt semantic content is generally negative and it is directed at either the self, a person other than the interlocutor, or some object. Subjects for the study are drawn from the university community. Examples of Negative judgements are collected in the field and analyzed. The paper then discusses some possible sociolinguistic rules for the use of negative judgements.

## Introduction

Compliments, Apologies, Greetings and other speech acts have been widely discussed in the Sociolinguistic literature. Negative Judgments, the subject of this paper, have neither been adequately discussed nor defined in the literature. In this study a very general definition of a Negative Judgement is offered:

A Negative Judgement is a speech act wherein: 1) the overt semantic content is generally negative; 2) the overt semantic content is either directed at: a) the self; b) a person other than the interlocutor; or c) an object, which has some negative effect on the self. The main function of Negative Judgements is not to transmit overt semantic content, but to open conversations and to maintain solidarity.

The combination of gender and speech acts has received little scholarly attention in the sociolinguistic and anthropological literature. Some early studies looked at the differences between men's and women's speech in non-western societies but not until the early 1970's were there any systematic empirical studies of western societies on the topic. These studies began to break the sexual stereotypes that initially slowed research in this area.

The type of research into this area varies depending upon one's purpose. It appears that, aside from the sociolinguistic research, most interest in this area has occurred in second language pedagogy. For the second language teacher and the second language textbook writer, the results of speech act and gender research has

very practical applications, in that this research consists of actual speech acts recorded in situ from real-life social situations, and therefore can be meaningfully applied to second language learning.

Second language students made aware of this data through class instruction, as well as through the reading of texts, can be better prepared to interact socially, using actual rules of speaking discovered through speech act research, rather than using either the teacher's or text author's linguistic norms, as usually has been the case. Applying the data from speech act research to class activities results in students being exposed to actual social situations. In the past, application of actual data usually has not occurred, making treatment of real world situations problematic in ESL classes. Second language students have always confronted instructors on this issue, questioning why it is that they have heard a particular linguistic form and at the same time find this form proscribed by the text or teacher. The present study and others that are similar make data available to teachers and text writers that can avert this problem.

In addition to the aforementioned classroom practicalities, there is a larger issue at hand. ESL workers have an obligation to make second language students aware of American values and norms through the study and application of actual speech behavior. This allows the student, if he or she so desires, to participate in social interaction "...appropriately and effectively..." (Hymes, 1962: 101). An awareness of speech acts enables the second language student to possess a linguistic repertoire consisting of actually existing alternatives which, to the advantage of the student, could increase both his/her communicative competence and grammatical competence.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, each additional speech act that is isolated and analyzed reveals sociolinguistic rules for its use, and knowledge of these rules will certainly increase knowledge about ourselves. This knowledge also can potentially increase intercultural communication and therefore mutual understanding.

## **Background**

This study sets forth a preliminary analysis of gender and negative judgments. Gender is included since it is "One of the most important, and until recently, least studied, variables conditioning speech behavior..." (Wolfson, 1989: 10). Negative judgments are identified and analyzed in this study since in the author's experience at least, they are salient speech acts that have received very little attention in the past.

Gender has been viewed as a social variable that affects speech as far back as 1959, in Edward T. Hall's groundbreaking The Silent Language. Jespersen (1922), in his work on language, includes a chapter entitled "The Woman", but the analysis contains little or no empirical evidence for the findings. Even though gender in this context has been investigated for a long time, empirically verified studies of gender and speech are still relatively rare. Lakoff's 1973 study, though not empirical, provided the impetus for a series of gender research articles. Enough criticism was generated by Lakoff's introspective study that this "...challenged other scholars to design and carry out empirical studies to test them [introspective notions about gender and language]." (Wolfson, 1989: 164).

Crosby and Nyquist (1977) carried out an empirical test of Lakoff's hypotheses, and they found in part that both males and females use the 'Female register', which they characterize as 'client speech' (1977: 320). O'Barr and Atkins (1980) found similar results in that it is the status or role relationship of the interlocutors, for example police/citizen, rather than the sex of the speaker, which affected speech behavior.<sup>1</sup>

The Negative Judgments as reported in this research are related to but not quite equivalent to Complaints or Disapproval as commonly reported in the literature. All three speech acts --Complaints, Disapproval, and Negative Judgements-- appear to be similar because they contain negative semantic information, but are actually quite different. Complaints are defined by Olshtain and Weinbach (1986) as speech acts in which: "...the Speaker (S) expresses displeasure or annoyance as a reaction to a past or ongoing action, the consequences of which affect the (S) unfavorably. This complaint is addressed to the hearer (H), whom the speaker holds responsible for the offensive action." (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1986: 195)

Olshtain and Weinbach include the following preconditions in this definition: a) S expects a favorable event to occur, e.g., a promise, or expects an unfavorable event to be prevented from occurring, e.g., a cancellation; b) some offensive act (A) results in having negative consequences for S; c) S sees H as responsible for A; and finally, d) S expresses frustration verbally (1986: 195). Disapprovals, in comparison, as defined by D'Amico-Reisner, were not explained so fully: "...scold, reprimand, rebuke, and reproach were found to share the common function of expressing disapproval." (D'Amico-Reisner 1983: 115, note)

In both Complaints and Disapprovals, the negative semantic content of the speech act is directed towards the interlocutor, as opposed to the Negative Judgement, where the negative content is directed towards the self (speaker), another person (other than the interlocutor), or an object.

Also, please note that both Complaints and Disapprovals utilize other speech acts as part of their definitions; for example, an unfulfilled promise can be part of a precondition for a complaint. In addition, it seems that, as speech acts, a 'scold' or 'reprimand' share the same function as a Disapproval.

### Data Collection

Since it has been established that systematic observations of speech behavior yields important cultural information (Holmes, in press: 7), a list of specific goals has been formulated for this study to help foster systematic observation and analysis:

1. Collect the Negative Judgment data within the University of Pennsylvania Speech Community;
2. Formulate hypotheses;
3. Examine these speech acts primarily in relation to gender of speaker and interlocutor;
4. Examine the distribution of these speech acts according to speaker's gender as they relate to: A) Status; B) Discoursal structure [X N (R or 0)], [0 N R] (X = conversation before the Negative Judgement, N = Negative Judgement, R = Response to the Negative Judgement, 0 = no utterance; C) Intimacy (Intimate or Non-intimate); and D) Topic: 1) Self, 2) Other Person and 3) Other Object;
5. Induce and infer functions, distribution and classification types of the Negative Judgments from examination of the data;
6. Speculate as to the position of the Negative Judgments in the culture of the speech community as a whole.

The Negative Judgments were collected from conversations between Native American-English speaking members of the University of Pennsylvania speech community. This group consists primarily of the white middle class. The norms of use of Negative Judgments for this particular group will be the focus of this study. These speech acts were recorded by pencil and paper at three different locations to allow contact with a variety of participants and situations: 1) Houston Hall's Hall of Flags where many undergraduate students gather for lunch. The tables are situated very closely together, making conversations easy to record; 2) an ESL Program's teachers' room. This room is used in one day by approximately 14 teachers, all of whom have graduate degrees; 3) the waiting room at the University of Pennsylvania hospital. This location was chosen to acquire speech acts from the non-academic portion of the Penn speech community; and 4) the author's colleagues' homes.

In these situations the Negative Judgments were written down, along with any preceding and following utterances. Also the sex of the interlocutors, the apparent status of the interlocutors, the setting and the scene were noted.

### Data Analysis

In speech act interaction studies, little attention has been paid to gender distribution. Upon a cursory inspection of the data, differential distribution according to gender seemed apparent, so that the current analysis is approached through differences in gender norm distribution. This distribution is viewed along with 5 other factors (goal number 4 above):

1. Interlocutor Status Relationship: high to low (h to l), equal to equal, and low to high (l to h);
2. Discoursal Structure: a) 'X N R' where the Negative Judgment 'N' is embedded between conversation 'X' and the response 'R' to the Negative Judgment, b) 'X N O' structure where the Negative Judgment ends the conversation, 'O' is equivalent to silence of some duration. This category is problematical, since the speech acts were hand transcriptions of spontaneous speech; sometimes the response to the Negative Judgment was lost or misrecorded. Therefore analysis and speculations is withheld on this structure; and c) 'O N R' where the Negative Judgments acts as a conversation opener;
3. Intimacy: 'I' indicating, intimate, a family relationship or 'N' a non-intimate non-stranger relationship. (There were no stranger interactions in the data.);
4. Topic of the exchange; and
5. Object of the Negative Judgments, which happens to be 'S', self, 100% of the time (see tables 1-6, Appendix A).

Four hypotheses were created based on readings in the Sociolinguistic Literature and on observations by the author. Since there were no directly related speech act data in the literature, some inferences were made. The four hypotheses are as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Expect females more than males to use Negative Judgments as a conversation opener. Conversation Opener here means to use a Negative Judgment to break a period of silence 'O', e.g., [O N R].

**Hypothesis 2:** Expect both females and males to have equal distribution when delivering a Negative Judgment to a person of higher status (h), equal status (=) or lower status (l).

**Hypothesis 3:** Expect females to deliver Negative Judgments more to intimates than to non-intimates.

**Hypothesis 4:** Expect females to offer more Negative Judgments than males.

## Results

All four hypotheses were tested using the  $X^2$  (Chi Squared) statistic. In testing Hypothesis 2, the Yates correction factor was used since the portion of the data used for this hypothesis had an 'N' of less than 5 in some of its expected cells. Each hypothesis result is presented, followed with some relevant post hoc comments.

Six dyad types emerged from the data: 1) FF (female to female); 2) MM (male to male); 3) FM (female to male); 4) MF (male to female); 5) FG (female to group); and 6) MG (male to group). The groups in dyad types 5 and 6 consisted of both males and females (See Appendix A, Tables 1 to 6 for further details).

**Hypothesis 1--** More females than males are expected to use Negative Judgments as Conversation Openers. The data yielded no significant statistical difference between M or F opening conversations in all 6 types of dyads.

### Post-hoc Comments:

Hypothesis 1 tested all 6 dyads as a whole. However, if we observe 2 particular types of dyad, FG and MG, the females in FG use the Negative Judgments as openers only 43% of the time. All of these occurred in a classroom setting delivered by a female professor. The males, in contrast, use this strategy 100% of the time, in the workplace setting and the Topic was always weather.

**Hypothesis 2--** It is expected that both M and F would deliver equal amounts of Negative Judgments to both high and low status addressees. (i.e., the acceptance of the Null Hypothesis is expected). The results are that females deliver significantly more negative judgments to addressees of both high and low status (Yates  $X^2 = 29.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Post-hoc Comments:

MM dyads--100% of the Negative Judgments were delivered to non-intimate equals.

FF dyads--80% of the Negative Judgments were delivered to high status addressees.

FM dyads--54% of the Negative Judgments were delivered to low status addressees, and 46% were delivered to equal status addressees. None (0%) were delivered to high status addressees in these dyads.

MF dyads--50% of Negative Judgments were delivered to high status addressees, 50% to low status addressees.

FG dyads--86% delivered from high to low, 14% to equal status addressees.

MG dyads--100% were delivered to groups of equal status.

**Hypothesis 3** -- Expect females to deliver more Negative Judgments to intimates than non-intimates. This hypothesis is confirmed as females were found to give significantly more Negative Judgments to intimates than non-intimates ( $X^2 = 10.16, p < .01$ ).

Post-hoc Comments:

FF dyads-100% of the Negative Judgments were delivered to intimates.

MM dyads-100% of the Negative Judgments were delivered to non-intimates.

FM dyads-15% to non-intimates, and 85% to intimates.

MF dyads-100% to non-intimates.

MG dyads-100% to non-intimates.

FG dyads-100% to non-intimates.

**Hypothesis 4** -- Expect females overall to deliver more Negative Judgments than males. This was found to be significant ( $X^2 = 14.32, p < .01$ ). While collecting data in the four locations mentioned above, there was an attempt to be positioned near an equal number of males and females for the data collection. The only time this was impossible was in the instructors' room in Bennet Hall at the University of Pennsylvania, where there is a higher percentage of females teaching in the morning, which is when the data was collected (60% F vs. 40% M).

Post-hoc Comments:

Of all dyad types, the 3 types that have female initiators (speakers) rank as first, second and third:

FM	35%	of the total # of Negative Judgments
FF	27%	"
FG	19%	"
MM	11%	"
MG	3%	"
MF	5%	"
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	

### Additional Post-hoc Comments

#### FF dyads

All of the Negative Judgments in these dyads were delivered between status unequals. Twenty percent (20%) were from high to low status, while the remaining 80% were from low to high.

In 10% of the cases, the Negative Judgments were embedded in the conversation and received a response (all data collected is listed in Appendix B, the numbers indicating the order of data collection). For example:

19. X  
a. "It was awful, she was a nervous wreck." N  
b. "Yeah" R  
Female, 35, single, talking to mother about a family member, low to high.

Another 10% consisted of the Negative Judgments positioned at or possibly cueing the end of the conversation:

20.  
a. "Daddy went to turn me and the needle was in me bent and I was screaming and daddy was crying." X  
b. "It was an awful spot" N  
a. "huh" R  
Female, about 60, response to daughter, in hospital waiting room, high to low.

In the remaining 80%, the Negative Judgments were preceded by silence [0], i.e., a break in the conversation was followed by a Negative Judgment and a response [0 N R]. Conversation Opener seems to be a main function of the Negative Judgments in these dyads. All of these FF exchanges took place in the University of Pennsylvania Hospital post-operative waiting room.



On different days there happened to be three pairs of mothers and daughters who provided the Negative Judgments. Males were present in about equal numbers to the females but no Negative Judgments were provided by the males during the observation time. The three pairs of mothers and daughters that were observed were overtly worried about someone in surgery and conversation seemed to be needed to alleviate tension and worry. The males seemed to be in the same situation but produced no Negative Judgments. Possibly, the males produced none for two reasons: 1) either they were not worried; or 2) do not express worry through Negative Judgments. It is possible that males have different uses for these speech acts.

All of the Negative Judgments exchanged in the FF dyad type were between intimates, i.e., mother and daughter. This relationship was verified through monitoring other information during the conversation.

#### MM dyads

One hundred percent (100%) of the MM dyads consisted of non-intimate equals. In contrast, 100% of the FF dyads were between intimates. All Negative Judgments in the MM dyads occurred after a period of silence [0 N]. In these MM dyads, the Negative Judgments appear to function as Conversation Starters. All of the males were professional colleagues. Seventy-five percent (75%) of the Negative Judgments' topics were about the workplace and the remaining 25% were about other people.

#### FM dyads

Fifty-four percent (54%) of the Negative Judgments were delivered to low status members, while the remaining 46% were delivered to those of equal status. None were delivered to a high status addressee in the FM dyads. Twenty-three percent (23%) of the Negative Judgments were embedded in the conversation [X N R] and the remaining 77% were preceded by silence [0 N R]. Again Conversation Starter seems to be an important function of the Negative Judgement. Fifteen percent (15%) were between non-intimates and 85% between intimates in this dyad type. Negative Judgments about Weather constituted 46% of the data, while Self was the topic 31% of the time, Objects were the topic 15% of the time, and Other Person was the topic 8% of the time.

### MF dyads

In this small data subset (N=2), 50% each of the Negative Judgments were delivered to those of low status and high status respectively. Fifty (50%) of the Negative Judgments were embedded in conversation [X N R] while the other 50% followed silence [0 N R]. Both interactions were with non-intimates and the topic of the Negative Judgments were 50% Other Person and 50% Other Object.

### FG dyads

Fully 86% of Negative Judgements in this dyad set were delivered to low status addressees and the other 14% to those of equal status. Again we see that females do not deliver Negative Judgments to higher status non-intimates. These addressee groups consisted of both males and females. Most of the Negative Judgments in this dyad type are conversation openers (0 N R). The topic of a majority of these Negative Judgments are about other people, but all of those were given by a female professor in a classroom context to students. Forty-three percent (43%) of the Negative Judgments were about other people, 29% concerned Weather and 14% concerned Objects. Seventy-one (71%) were followed by silence [N 0] and none were embedded in a conversation. All of the Negative Judgments in the FG dyads were between non-intimates.

### MG dyad

This smallest of the groups consisted of 1 exchange between equal non-intimates. The Negative Judgment was followed by silence [N 0] and concerned the Weather.

## **Discussion**

Negative Judgments appear to be used generally as Conversation Openers by both sexes. Seventy-three Percent (73%) of the total were used in this capacity. As Conversation Openers, they exhibit the general discorsal formula [0 N R] or [0 N 0], i.e., silence [0] followed by the Negative Judgement [N] and either a response [R] or further silence [0].

This function of Negative Judgments seems counter-intuitive as do so many of these data. In informal interviews with native speakers of American English about their use of Negative Judgments, they intimated that they did not use them much and if they

did use Negative Judgments at all, they considered them impolite. Some claimed Negative Judgments were only used when they (the speakers) were in 'bad' moods.

After examining the entire data set as a whole, no difference was found between the sexes in using the Negative Judgement to open conversations. But when looking at particular dyad groups, females use Negative Judgments as openers to intimate (family) males more than any other dyad group, and males use Negative Judgments for openers mostly with male non-intimates. One way to interpret these results is to view the female as performing the traditional role of caretaker or solidarity enhancer of the family. The males on the other hand, seem to be attempting to establish solidarity outside of the family, also a traditional role; in a sense, they were 'networking'. Seventy-five percent (75%) of these male non-intimate interactions were Negative Judgments made at the workplace about the workplace. It may be a strategy that ensures job security or at the minimum increases conviviality at the workplace. As males treat Apologies differently than females (Holmes, in press: 7), it seems that males also treat Negative Judgments differently than females.

Even when Negative Judgments are used within a conversation [X N R], there can be a creation or reaffirmation of solidarity or sympathy. This is related to the fact that of all the Negative Judgments offered in this study, by both males and females, not one was rejected by the addressee, i.e., not one of the responses to any Negative Judgement was a disagreement with the content of the Negative Judgement. Therefore it appears that the speaker would not offer a Negative Judgment if there were an expectation of its being rejected.

So the speaker seems to expect empathy, because agreement with the Negative Judgement by the addressee means accepting that the speaker has some pain. This seems true especially since the initiator of the Negative Judgments (the Self) is always the one who is 'suffering'. For example, in a Weather Type:

2.           0  
           a. "Phew it's cold" N  
           b. (agreeing responses) R  
 Male, about 40, 7:45 a.m. before beginning to teach at 8 a.m., to all teachers present.

It is cold for the *speaker*, or in the following:

13.           0  
           a. "This god damn thing" N  
           b. "Why don't they get a new one?" R  
           a. "They'll probably get the cheapest one" N

b. (and others) "yeah" R  
Female, 35, comment to other teachers waiting to use the photocopier.

The photocopier is a problem for the speaker. Through Negative Judgments, the speaker lets the addressee know of his/her negative condition and always, when responding, the addressee responds with agreement (a study of responses to Negative Judgments would certainly prove interesting). The rule seems to be: 1) deliver a Negative Judgment if you know there will be no disagreement, or 2) if a Negative Judgment is delivered to you (addressee) then a) agree or b) do not respond. Another way to view this is that one may only deliver a Negative Judgment to one that can be trusted.

A syntactic formula was strongly expected to be apparent in Negative Judgments, as is manifest in Compliments, since linguistic formulas increase expectation and decrease the chance of misinterpretation (Herbert, 1986: 3). A compliment is basically something positive about 'Other' or 'Other Object', while Negative Judgments have been found to be negative about 'Self', 'Other Person', or 'Other Object':

1. Self -	22%	of total Negative Judgments
2. Other Person -	38%	"
3. Other Object -	41%	"

The 'Self' category includes three subsets:

1) physical state Negative Judgments, e.g.:

28. 0  
a. "Goddam I don't like my stomach feeling like this, it hurts." N  
b. 0  
Female, about 30, to husband after she had operation.

2) self's possessions:

25. 0  
a. "It's all crummy. The kitchen floor is crummy. All of it" N  
b. "Wildwood" R  
a. "All those old blankets, I don't want them" N  
b. "I should throw them out" R  
Female, about 35, to mother after break in conversation.

3) self's ability: