Discourse Expression of Gender Differences in English Language —— Taking *legally blonde* as an Example

Wang Xiaoyu [1,*]

[1] College of Humanities & Information Changchun University of Technology, Jilin 130122, China

*Corresponding author Email: 1914337664@qq.com

Abstract：In linguistic academic research, gender differences are often reflected in discourse patterns, vocabulary selection, and intonation. This paper focuses on the discourse expression of gender differences in the English language, using the film Legally Blonde as a specific case study. The dialogues of different gender roles in Legally Blonde exhibit typical characteristics. Through the analysis of this film, it is found that male discourse tends to be more direct, concise, and authoritative, while female discourse contains more emotional nuances and euphemistic vocabulary. From a pragmatic perspective, this difference effectively reflects societal role expectations for different genders. Through an in-depth study of the character dialogues in the film, this research helps reveal the forms of gender differences in English discourse expression, providing new perspectives for better understanding the relationship between gender and language in cross-cultural communication and language learning, as well as offering a reference for eliminating language biases caused by gender.

Keywords: English language; Gender differences; Pragmatics; Discourse expression; *Legally Blonde*.

I. Introduction

(I) Research Background

1.1.1 The Importance of Studying Gender Differences in the English Language

From a linguistic perspective, examining gender differences enriches academic research by providing diverse angles for inquiry. For example, at the semantic level, studies have shown that the same word can carry completely different meanings depending on gender. The term "bossy," when applied to women, often carries negative connotations of being domineering, whereas similar behavior in men might be described as "assertive." This phenomenon prompts semanticists to re-examine the relationship between lexical semantics and social factors such as gender, thereby enriching semantic theory. Gender is also a significant factor contributing to variations in the English language. Differences between genders may manifest in phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, and other linguistic aspects. For

instance, women, especially those specializing in language studies, tend to use standard pronunciation more frequently, as their language abilities develop earlier, giving them an advantage in linguistic proficiency. Men, on the other hand, may exhibit more diverse accents, including regional variations, due to less emphasis on standardized pronunciation. Research into gender-related linguistic variations helps comprehensively understand the diversity of the English language, recognizing that language is not a monolithic system but a rich tapestry of variations influenced by multiple social factors. From a socio-cultural perspective, studying gender differences helps uncover hidden gender power structures in society. For example, men have traditionally held dominant social positions, and this power dynamic is reflected in language use. A clear illustration is the difference in apology strategies: women tend to use more euphemistic language to express politeness and preserve others' feelings and dignity (face), whereas men are less likely to apologize, as apologizing might be perceived as undermining their dignity. Even when apologizing, men tend to use more formal and appropriate language. In contrast, women are more adept at employing apology strategies to maintain relationships and are more likely to accept apologies. [2]

1.1.2 Reasons for Selecting *Legally Blonde* as a Case Study

From the context of feminist development, women's demands for social status transformation have become increasingly prominent since the 1990s. Although progress has been made in education and employment, women still face numerous restrictions and stereotypes in traditional views. At the time of the film's setting, the United States was entrenched in a male-dominated societal structure. [3] In this context, male lawyers were commonly seen dominating courtrooms, a scenario audiences had grown accustomed to, as professions like law were traditionally viewed as male-dominated fields. This perception is reflected in the film through the prejudice encountered by Elle Woods upon entering Harvard Law School. Historically, women have been marginalized, often relegated to roles as dependents or even "appendages" of men. [4] The phrase "men rule outside, women rule inside" encapsulates this dynamic. However, the protagonist Elle Woods defies societal expectations, symbolizing women's resistance to traditional gender roles in real life and their pursuit of self-worth and social status. From the perspective of female self-awareness, an increasing number of women are no longer content with roles such as "housewives" or subordinate partners. Elle evolves from a fashion-obsessed young woman into a determined and accomplished legal professional, reflecting this trend of self-awareness. In fact, the film's backdrop coincides with the aftermath of the Third-Wave Feminist Movement in the United States, which significantly improved women's status in education, politics, and other domains. Women gradually gained recognition and respect, achieving milestones such as suffrage and increased political representation. For instance, the number of women in the U.S. Congress rose from 10 in 1960 to 16 in 1979, including 16 Black women. [5]

(II) Research Objectives and Significance

1.2.1 Research Objectives

1.To deeply analyze the specific manifestations of gender differences in English discourse expression through a detailed examination of dialogues in *Legally Blonde*. This includes exploring vocabulary choices, syntactic structures, intonation, and attitudinal expressions to provide vivid case studies and robust data support for gender difference research in the English language.

2.To investigate the factors influencing gender differences in discourse expression by contextualizing the film's social background, cultural values, and character relationships. This involves analyzing how societal role expectations, cultural traditions, and specific scenarios shape gendered language use, thereby enhancing understanding of the interplay between language, society, and culture.

3.To offer insights for promoting effective cross-gender communication. By revealing gender differences in English language use through the film, this study aims to foster awareness of gendered communication styles, reduce misunderstandings, and improve the quality and efficiency of cross-gender interactions.

1.2.2 Research Significance

1.**Enhancing Cross-Cultural Communication**: Understanding gender differences in English across cultural contexts helps communicators better interpret language behaviors and intentions, minimizing conflicts arising from cultural and gender disparities. This study provides concrete knowledge about gendered language differences, improving the quality and success of cross-cultural communication.

2.**Promoting Gender Equality**: By analyzing how gendered discourse in the film reflects societal realities, this research draws attention to gender inequality and challenges traditional stereotypes. It advocates for respect and understanding of diverse linguistic expressions across genders, contributing to theoretical and practical advancements in gender equality.

3.**Informing Language Education**: Recognizing that language is shaped by social factors such as class, status, and gender, this study encourages educators to adopt personalized teaching strategies. For example, tailoring vocabulary and speaking exercises to address gender-specific learning needs can enhance pedagogical effectiveness while fostering students' awareness of cross-gender communication.

(III) Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in **sociolinguistics** and **pragmatics**, integrated with **gender studies** and **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**. This multi-layered theoretical framework systematically elucidates the mechanisms of gendered discourse expression in English and its socio-cultural roots.

1.3.1.Sociolinguistic Perspective: Gender and Power Theory

1.**Lakoff's "Women's Language Hypothesis"**:
Robin Lakoff (1975) posited that women's language often exhibits "powerless" features, such as euphemisms, interrogative intonation, emotional modifiers (e.g., "maybe," "perhaps"), and avoidance of direct commands (e.g., "Could you help me?" instead of "Help me"). These features are seen as reflections of women's subordinate status in societal power structures. In this study, male characters'

use of direct statements and professional terminology contrasts with Lakoff's theory, revealing how men reinforce authority through linguistic monopolization in legal professions. [9]

2.O'Barr & Atkins' "Power and Language Style":

O'Barr and Atkins (1980) found in courtroom studies that language style differences are not solely gender-determined but closely tied to **social power**. For instance, women's use of "powerless language" may stem from occupational status rather than inherent gender traits. This study examines whether Elle's "inquisitive communication" in *Legally Blonde* arises from her novice lawyer status (power disadvantage) rather than gender alone. [10]

1.3.2 Pragmatic Perspective: Face Theory and Communication Strategies

Brown and Levinson's **Face Theory** (1987) provides a critical framework for analyzing gendered language strategies in legal contexts. [11] The theory posits that individuals seek to maintain "positive face" (desire for approval) and "negative face" (desire for autonomy). In professional settings like courtroom debates, male characters employ direct strategies that threaten the hearer's face (e.g., assertions: "You must strictly follow the rules of evidence") to assert authority. In contrast, female characters like Elle use consultative questions (e.g., "Could you first tell me the main points?"), balancing professional discourse with interpersonal harmony through positive face strategies.

1.3.3 Gender Performativity Theory

Judith Butler's **Gender Performativity Theory** (1990) offers a critical lens for understanding the dynamic relationship between language and gender. [12] Butler argues that gender is not an innate biological trait but a social role constructed through repeated linguistic and behavioral "performances." This theory informs our analysis in two ways:

1.Language as a Constructive Force: The monopolization of legal terminology by male characters exemplifies Butler's "normative performativity," reinforcing professional authority through linguistic repetition.

2.Subversive Potential of Discourse: Elle's "consultative questioning" constitutes "subversive performativity," blending emotional expression with professional jargon to destabilize fixed gender boundaries.

II. Research Methodology

(I) Corpus Collection and Analysis

2.1.1 Corpus Selection Criteria

This study extracts dialogues from *Legally Blonde* based on three principles:

1.**Scenario Diversity**: Covering professional (e.g., courtroom debates, classroom discussions) and informal contexts (e.g., social gatherings, daily conversations).

2.**Salient Gender Differences**: Prioritizing scenes with pronounced gendered language contrasts, such as male characters' logical assertions versus female characters' emotion-laden expressions.

3.**Role Representativeness**: Ensuring balanced inclusion of dialogues from major male and female characters (e.g., Elle, Warner, professors).

2.1.2.Corpus Extraction Process

1.**Scene Identification**: Repeated viewings of the film to mark scenes meeting the above criteria, noting timestamps, participants, and themes.

2.**Dialogue Transcription**: Verbatim transcription of selected scenes, preserving paralinguistic features (e.g., fillers, pauses).

2.1.3 Corpus Annotation and Organization

1.**Scenario Classification**: Tagging dialogues by scene type (e.g., courtroom, classroom) and speaker gender.

2.**Linguistic Feature Annotation**:

Lexical Level: Underlining emotional terms (e.g., "amazing"), bracketing professional jargon (e.g., "hearsay evidence rule").

Syntactic Level: Labeling sentence structures (S-simple, C-compound, CX-complex).

Pragmatic Level: Noting face strategies (e.g., "consultative question," "direct assertion").

3.**Quality Control**: Cross-verifying transcriptions and removing irrelevant content.

Note: As a theoretical analytical article, this study focuses on qualitative interpretation of linguistic phenomena rather than quantitative data analysis.

III. Case Analysis

(I) Dialogue Analysis

3.1.1 Differences in Professional Terminology Usage

Scene 1: Classroom discussion of a legal case

Male Character: "According to the theory of criminal negligence in criminal law, the defendant's behavior has clearly constituted a negligent crime... The legal concepts involved here are quite clear. Factors like 'subjective fault' and 'causality between behavior and result' are key."

Elle Woods: "Well, I know the concept of criminal negligence, but I think we also need to consider specific circumstances, like the defendant's mental state... I'm a little confused about determining 'subjective fault' here."

Scene 2: Internship discussion with a mentor

Male Mentor: "The key lies in the admissibility of evidence… You must study the relevant legal provisions."

Elle Woods: "Mentor, I don't quite understand the 'hearsay evidence rule.' Could you first explain its definition?"

Analysis:

> Male characters demonstrate fluency in legal terminology (e.g., "criminal negligence," "admissibility of evidence"), reflecting authoritative command of professional knowledge.

- Female characters contextualize terminology within practical scenarios, adopting a cautious, detail-oriented approach.

From a performativity lens, male terminology monopolization embodies O'Barr's "power language" and Butler's "normative performativity." Elle's consultative questions subvert gendered norms through "disruptive performativity."

3.1.2.Differences in Emotional Vocabulary

Frequency and Depth: Female dialogues feature abundant emotional terms (e.g., "amazing," "accomplished"), while male dialogues prioritize factual statements (e.g., Warner's focus on career goals).

Expressive Styles: Women articulate nuanced emotions (e.g., Elle's "I feel so accomplished!"), whereas men use generalized expressions (e.g., "hope for a good future").

(II) Communication Styles

3.2.1 Female Communication Style

Relational Focus: Women prioritize emotional connection and shared experiences, as seen in Elle's heartfelt conversations with friends.

Inquisitive Approach: Women frequently employ questions to seek understanding, reflecting Tannen's "rapport-talk" and collaborative problem-solving.

3.2.2 Male Communication Style

Instrumental Focus: Men emphasize logic, efficiency, and goal-oriented discourse, aligning with Tannen's "report-talk."

Direct Assertions: Male characters dominate discussions through declarative statements (e.g., professors' lectures), reinforcing authority.

IV. Factors Influencing Gendered Discourse in *Legally Blonde*

(I) Social Roles and Expectations

4.1.1 Gendered Role Allocation

Historically, gender-based labor divisions positioned men as dominant and women as subordinate. Male characters' direct, authoritative language in legal settings (e.g., courtroom debates) reinforces professional authority, while female characters initially face dismissals of their capabilities (e.g., Elle being labeled a "Malibu Barbie").

4.1.2 Divergent Social Expectations

- **Men**: Expected to excel in careers, using logical, persuasive language to assert competence.
- **Women**: Pressured to prioritize family roles, as seen in Elle's initial motivation to win back her ex-boyfriend.

(II) Cultural Context

4.2.1 Gender Equality Ideals

Subverting Stereotypes: Elle's evolution from a "bimbo" stereotype to a successful lawyer challenges traditional gender roles, symbolizing women's capacity to thrive in male-dominated fields.
Female Solidarity: The film emphasizes women's mutual support (e.g., Elle's friendship with Vivian), countering narratives of female rivalry.

V. Socio-Cultural Significance of Gendered Discourse in *Legally Blonde*

(I).Reflection and Challenge of Gender Equality

The film mirrors real-world gender inequalities (e.g., male dominance in legal discourse) while subverting norms through Elle's hybrid language style (emotional + professional). Her pink-suited courtroom confidence exemplifies how women can redefine professional spaces.

(I) Advocacy for Social Change

Education: Integrate gender equality education using media analysis.
Media: Promote egalitarian gender portrayals in films.
Social Interaction: Encourage respectful, inclusive communication across genders.

VI. Conclusion

(I).Key Findings

1. **Lexical Level**: Women's emotionally rich vocabulary reflects societal expectations but also showcases linguistic versatility.
2. **Syntactic Level**: Women's use of questions and exclamations challenges power imbalances, while men's declarative sentences reinforce authority.

3. **Intonational Level**: Women's dynamic intonation breaks stereotypes of passivity.

(II) Future Research Directions

1. **Cross-Genre Analysis**: Explore gendered discourse in diverse film genres (e.g., action, sci-fi).
2. **Cross-Cultural Comparisons**: Contrast gendered language in Western and Eastern films.
3. **Applied Studies**: Design gender-sensitive curricula and workplace training programs.

References

［1］Butler J. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity[M]. New York, London: Routledge, 1990.

［2］Chang Tian. An Exploration of the Relationship Between Language and Gender [J]. Rural Consultants, 2020, (03): 197.

［3］Cheng Yaping. The Narrative Logic of American Feminist Films [J]. *Film Literature*, 2017, (24): 33-34.

［4］Editorial Department. Don't Be Bound by Gender Stereotypes [J]. Shanghai Education, 2016, (20): 1.

［5］Feng Li. An Analysis of Elizabeth's Feminist Consciousness in Pride and Prejudice [J]. Overseas English, 2024(3): 202-204.

［6］Han Jinhai. Gender Differences in Language [J]. Comparative Studies of Cultural Innovation, 2022, 6 (08): 26-29.

［7］Li Jinchi. The Enlightenment and Impact of Sociolinguistics on English Language Teaching [J]. Modern English, 2020, (24): 93-95.

［8］Li Xin. The Development and Impact of Post-War American Feminist Movements [J]. Youthful Years, 2019, (09): 232.

［9］Li Yinhe. Feminism[M]. Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House, 2005: 15–63.

［10］Lin Na. The Embodiment of Feminism in the Film Legally Blonde [J]. Film Literature, 2014, (13): 102-103.

［11］Liu Weihong. A Brief Analysis of Gender Cultural Differences in Cross-Cultural Communication [J]. Campus English, 2019, (07): 232.

［12］Lü Changteng. Rethinking Women's Rights from a Gender Perspective [J]. Taste·Classics, 2023, (23): 37-40.

［13］O'Barr W, Atkins BK. "Women's Language" or "Powerless Language" [C]// Language, Communication and Education.

［14］Talbot, M. (2004). Language and Gender: An Introduction (Translated by Ai Xiaoming, Tang Hongmei, and Ke Qianting). Central China Normal University Press.

［15］Tannen D. You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House

［16］Wang Shaoping, Hu Jialin. A Utopian Interpretation of Female Community in Amy Tan's The Valley of Amazement [J]. Straits Humanities Journal, 2022, 2(4): 48-55.

［17］Wang Yongliang. Theoretical Foundations and Corpus Collection Methods in Experimental Pragmatics [J]. Literature Education (I), 2015, (03): 117-119.

［18］Wang Yuxiao. Euphemisms from the Perspective of Face Theory [J]. Journal of Anyang Normal University, 2011(4):69-71.

［19］Xu Fang. A Review of Gender Language Studies [C]// Proceedings of the 11th National Academic Symposium of the China Association for Comparative Studies of English and Chinese. 2014:168.

［20］Zhang Jingjie. The Historical Path of Gender Communication Studies in the United States [J]. Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China), 2022, 44(11): 46-56. DOI:10.19997/j.cnki.xdcb.2022.11.019.