



Performing Gender Through Women's Language and Gossip in The Tonight Show Featuring Millie Bobby Brown

Sysca Indriany^{1*}, Fathur Ramadhan²

¹⁻² English Literature Study Program, STBA JIA, Jl. Cut Mutia No. 16A, Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia

Email : syscaindriany02@gmail.com^{1*}, fathurramadhan245@gmail.com²

*Author Correspondence: syscaindriany02@gmail.com

Abstract. This study examines how women's language features and gossip function as communicative strategies in the performance of gender identity in contemporary media discourse. Drawing on sociolinguistic frameworks proposed by Lakoff, Holmes, Bucholtz and Hall, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, McAndrew, and Butler's gender performativity theory, this study analyzes Millie Bobby Brown's utterances in The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, with data collected through purposive sampling of conversational segments containing women's language features and gossip instances. The analysis identified 21 instances of women's language features, including intensifiers, hedges, empty adjectives, politeness forms, and emotional expressions, alongside five instances of gossip serving social bonding, entertainment, and reputation management functions. The findings indicate that these linguistic features do not reflect powerlessness or negative stereotypes; rather, they function as context-dependent performative resources through which the speaker constructs a warm, expressive, and socially engaged gender identity before a mass audience. This study contributes to sociolinguistic research by demonstrating that women's language and gossip are dynamic communicative practices actively employed in the performance of gender in contemporary talk show discourse.

Keywords: Gender Performativity; Gossip; Media Discourse; Talk Show; Women's Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, media plays a significant role in shaping public understanding of gender and communication. Television programs, interviews, podcasts, and online talk shows do not merely entertain, but also as platforms where social identities are performed and interpreted by audiences. Through interaction and conversation, speakers present certain linguistic styles, emotional expressions, and communicative behaviors that influence how gender roles are perceived in society. Media discourse plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing ideas about femininity, masculinity, and interpersonal communication.

Talk shows provide a particularly interesting context for sociolinguistic analysis due to spontaneous and nature. In these interactions, speakers use expressive language, personal storytelling, emotional reactions, and evaluative comments that reflect social and cultural expectations. Female celebrities in talk shows are often associated with communicative styles such as emotional expression, politeness, and gossip, which are stereotypically linked to women's language. Analyzing language use in talk show interactions can reveal how gender identities are constructed and performed through discourse in contemporary media settings.

In social interaction, communication is essential for building and maintaining relationships with others. Communication involves sharing information, ideas, thoughts, or feelings through verbal and non-verbal elements, such as spoken or written language, gestures,

facial expressions, and body language. These elements convey meaning in different contexts and enable individuals to develop understanding, trust, and emotional connection. Through communication, people not only exchange information but also construct social relationships and identities.

In sociolinguistics, communication is not merely the exchange of information, but a social practice through which identities, relationships, and power dynamics are constructed and negotiated. Through communication, individuals share ideas and feelings, interpret meaning, maintain social connections, and participate effectively in society. Effective communication allows people to negotiate meaning, resolve conflicts, and strengthen social bonds, while communication difficulties may lead to misunderstanding and social distance. Furthermore, communication reflects social roles, identities, and cultural norms that influence how individuals interact in different contexts. Therefore, communication becomes an essential aspect of human interaction and social life.

Language plays a central role in communication, functioning as a medium for expressing meaning and a tool for constructing social identities and reproducing social ideologies. Research shows that language actively shapes gender constructions within society. (Subasi, 2020) implied that language contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies that position women in subordinate roles. (Lakoff, 1975) suggests that differences in language use between men and women are socially constructed and rooted in inequality. This perspective is further developed by (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013) and (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), who view gender and identity as socially constructed through discourse and interaction.

The relationship between gender and language has become an important focus in understanding how social identities are constructed through linguistic practices. (Lakoff, 1975) introduces the concept of "women's language," refers to linguistic features commonly associated with women, such as hedges, tag questions, empty adjectives, and intensifiers. Lakoff argues that these features reflect women's subordinate position in society. However, (Holmes, 1995) suggested that women's language should not be interpreted solely as a sign of weakness, but also as a strategy to build solidarity, express empathy, and maintain interpersonal relationships. This perspective is supported by (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013), who emphasize that language use is shaped by social context and interaction rather than fixed gender roles. Therefore, women's language should be understood as dynamic and context-dependent.

In addition to women's language, gossip is another important aspect of language and gender studies. Gossip is generally defined as informal talk about absent third parties, often involving evaluative content. (McAndrew, 2014) explained that gossip functions as a means of

social bonding, entertainment, and reputation management. Although gossip is practiced by all genders, it is often stereotypically associated with women. (Rosida & Handayani, 2023) argued that this association is socially constructed and reinforced through media representation. Gossip function as a trivial talk, communicative and social strategies in the performance of gender identity in contemporary media discourse.

In contemporary society, media plays a significant role in shaping public understanding of gender and communication. Television programs, particularly talk shows, provide interactive spaces where language, identity, and social roles are performed before a wide audience. Drawing on sociolinguistic perspectives, (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) argue that identity is constructed through interaction, while (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013) emphasize that gender is shaped through social practice within specific contexts. In talk show interactions, speakers use particular linguistic styles, emotional expressions, and storytelling strategies to construct socially recognizable identities. Therefore, media discourse does not simply reflect social reality, but also actively contributes to the construction and reinforcement of gender norms and identities.

The selection of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* featuring Millie Bobby Brown is based on its popularity and interactive format. The show presents informal and engaging conversations that allow more natural linguistic features to emerge, making it a suitable context for analyzing women's language and gossip. In addition, the program's wide audience reach makes it influential in shaping public perceptions of gendered communication in contemporary media discourse.

Despite extensive research on language and gender, several gaps remain in the study of women's language and gossip within contemporary media discourse. Previous studies, such as (Lakoff, 1975), mainly focus on the theoretical characteristics of women's language, while (McAndrew, 2014) discusses the social function of gossip without examining its linguistic performance in media interaction. In addition, (Rosida & Handayani, 2023) analyze gossip in film representation but provide limited attention to spontaneous conversational interaction and sociolinguistic features in talk shows. Therefore, there is still limited research that specifically examines how women's language features and gossip simultaneously function as communicative strategies for constructing gender identity in contemporary media discourse.

This issue becomes increasingly important because modern media platforms actively shape public perceptions of gendered communication through highly performative and audience-oriented interaction. The way female celebrities express emotion, use intensifiers and hedges, tell personal stories, and engage in gossip may influence how femininity and women's

communication styles are socially interpreted. As a result, analyzing women's language and gossip in talk show discourse is not only relevant to sociolinguistic studies, but also important for understanding how media contributes to the construction and reinforcement of gender identities and stereotypes in contemporary society.

Based on these gaps, this study offers novelty by combining the analysis of women's language features, gossip practices, and gender performativity within a sociolinguistic framework in media discourse. Unlike previous studies that examine these aspects separately, this research investigates how linguistic choices and gossip are strategically used to construct socially recognizable gender identities in a contemporary talk show interaction. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how women's language and gossip are used by Millie Bobby Brown in *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and to examine how these linguistic practices contribute to the performance of gender in media discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that examines the relationship between language and society. (Holmes, 1995) states that sociolinguistics focuses on how language is used in different social contexts, while (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014) emphasize that language cannot be separated from the social environment in which it is used. Language and society share a reciprocal relationship: language reflects social values, identities, and cultural practices, while social factors influence linguistic choices and language variation. As (Nikzad, 2023) argues, language and society continuously influence one another in a dynamic process of social interaction.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language serves not only to exchange information but also to construct social identities and negotiate social meanings. Individuals make linguistic choices that reflect their social positions, relationships, and communicative goals within particular contexts. This perspective is relevant to the present study because the use of women's language features and gossip in media discourse can be understood as sociolinguistic practices through which speakers construct and perform gender identities. Therefore, sociolinguistics provides an appropriate theoretical framework for analyzing how language is strategically used in talk show interactions and how gender is performed through discourse.

Women's Language

The concept of women's language was first systematically introduced by (Lakoff, 1975), who identified a set of linguistic features commonly associated with female speakers, including hedges (*I think, sort of*), tag questions (*isn't it?*), empty adjectives (*lovely, adorable*), intensifiers (*so, very, really*), and hypercorrect grammar. Lakoff argued that these features reflect women's marginalized social position, making their speech appear tentative and less authoritative than men's.

Subsequent sociolinguistic research has challenged Lakoff's framework, finding that women do not necessarily use more hedges, intensifiers, or tag questions in all contexts. Rather, linguistic behavior must be analyzed through multiple factors, including social position, topic, relationship with the interlocutor, personality, and occasion. (Holmes, 1995), who reframes women's linguistic features as relational strategies for building solidarity and expressing empathy.

Gossip as Social and Communicative Practice

Gossip is informal talk involving evaluative commentary about absent third parties. Although commonly stereotyped as a feminine practice, scholars consistently challenge this as a social construction rather than an empirical reality. (McAndrew, 2014) demonstrated that gossip functions universally across genders as a mechanism for social bonding and reputation management. This is supported by a study using a novel empirical paradigm involving real interactions between a large sample of participants, which found that gossip is a rich, multifaceted construct that plays a critical role in vicarious learning and social bonding, contrary to folk intuitions that narrowly cast it as baseless trash talk (Jolly & Chang, 2021).

In media contexts, gossip takes on an additional performative dimension. Research has found that gossip plays an important role in establishing and supporting group values and behaviors, and contributes to the development and social construction of identity. (Rosida & Handayani, 2023) argued that media representation actively reinforces the gendered association of gossip with femininity, contributing to the reproduction of gender stereotypes. Analyzing gossip in talk show discourse reveals its communicative functions and its role in the ongoing performance of gendered identity before a public audience.

Gender Performativity

(Butler, 1990) foundational framework argues that gender is not a fixed or innate characteristic but a repeated performance constituted through social acts, discourse, and the citation of culturally intelligible norms. Butler's arguments that gender is performative have been highly influential in language and gender research, meshing well with the ongoing shift

in how linguists examined the relationship between language and social categories such as gender. This perspective reconceptualizes gender as something people do rather than something people are.

(Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) extend this framework into sociolinguistics, proposing that identity is intersubjectively constructed through discourse and is relational, positional, and emergent in interaction. Applied to media contexts, research on gender performance in digital social interaction demonstrates that speakers strategically use language to perform and negotiate gender identity, reflecting both existing norms and emerging discourses (Majumdar et al., 2022). In a talk show setting, each expressive utterance and storytelling episode can be understood as a performative act contributing to the construction of socially recognizable gender identity before a mass audience.

Media Discourse and Gender Construction

Media discourse has become a central focus in sociolinguistic research on gender, providing a publicly accessible and widely influential site where language and identity intersect. Studies examining television series demonstrate that media practices actively represent the feminine gender and reflect how it is perceived by society, with language in televised contexts playing a central role in shaping public understanding of femininity. Talk shows offer a unique context for analysis due to their interactive and semi-spontaneous format, allowing naturalistic linguistic features to emerge more freely than in scripted media.

A systematic review of the literature on gender and media representations found that stereotyping representations remain common across a wide range of contexts, and that exposure to such representations strengthens beliefs in gender stereotypes, endorses gender role norms, and can stifle career-related ambitions in women (Santonniccolo et al., 2023). Research examining the portrayal of gossip in television shows across generations found that it functions as a prism for understanding identity, power, and belonging, serving as both social glue and a channel through which people negotiate group dynamics and social norms (Doring et al., 2025). This highlights the importance of critically examining how female speakers present themselves linguistically in contemporary media settings.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design within a sociolinguistic framework to examine the use of women's language and gossip in media discourse. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on interpreting linguistic features and their role in the construction of gender through interaction (Creswell & David, 2023).

The data were obtained from selected segments of The Tonight Show Starring (Fallon, 2025) featuring Millie Bobby Brown. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected conversational segments containing women's language features and instances of gossip. The main data consisted of Millie Bobby Brown's utterances transcribed from the video recordings. The unit of analysis was utterances containing women's language features and gossip. The research instruments included video recordings from the official YouTube channel, transcription documents, and coding categories derived from the analytical framework.

Data collection involved selecting relevant video segments, transcribing the conversations, and identifying utterances containing women's language features and gossip. The data were then analyzed descriptively using (Lakoff, 1975) framework of women's language, (McAndrew, 2014) concept of gossip, and the perspectives of (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) as well as (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013) to examine how linguistic choices contribute to the performance of gender in media discourse.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the analysis of Millie Bobby Brown's utterances in The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, 21 instances of women's language features were identified, along with several instances of gossip. The identified features include hedges, intensifiers, empty adjectives, politeness forms, and emotional expressions. These features appear in different conversational contexts throughout the interaction and form the basis for further discussion.

Table 1. Distribution of Intensifier in the Data.

No.	Utterances	Features	Explanation
1.	"I'm definitely gonna be sneak surprising..."	Intensifier	"definitely" strengthen the statement
2.	"She is the best."	Intensifier	Expresses a positive evaluation toward the subject
3.	"It feels so amazing"	Intensifier	"so" strengthen emotional expression
4.	"it's so emotional."	Intensifier	Emphasize emotion
5.	"it's also really emotional..."	Intensifier	"really" strengthen the expression
6.	"it was just a really wholesome day"	Intensifier	Expresses a positive emotional evaluation of an experience
7.	"That is unbelievably the most thoughtful thing ever"	Intensifier	"unbelievably" strengthen a superlative evaluation, indicating the highest level of praise
8.	"I was actually really happy."	Intensifier	"actually" and "really" strengthen emotional expression
9.	"I couldn't believe it..."	Intensifier	Indicates a strong emotional expression

The data in Table 1 shows that intensifiers are constitute the most dominant women's language feature in the interaction, with nine instances identified across various conversational contexts. Expressions like *definitely*, *so*, *really*, *actually*, and *unbelievably* consistently appear

in utterances where the speaker describes personal experiences and emotional reactions. These intensifiers serve to amplify the emotional weight of the speaker's statements, making her narratives more vivid and engaging for the audience. This finding aligns with (Lakoff, 1975) observation that intensifiers are among the most frequently occurring features in women's language. However, unlike Lakoff's original argument, the intensifiers in this data function as expressive and performative resources. In a talk show, where storytelling and audience engagement are central, the use of intensifiers contributes to the construction of an emotionally expressive and relatable public persona. This is consistent with (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) view that identity is actively constructed through interaction and linguistic choices.

Table 2. Distribution of Hedges in the Data.

No.	Utterances	Features	Explanation
1.	"I feel like when they told us that..."	Hedge	"I feel like" indicates uncertainty
2.	"Like, it didn't seem out of the ordinary"	Hedge	"like" soften the statement and reduce certainty
3.	"I think she doesn't understand it."	Hedge	"I think" mitigate and weaken the force of the opinion
4.	"before, it was kind of like..."	Hedge	"kind of like" soften the statement
5.	"which I think is kind of..."	Hedge	"I think" and "kind of" mitigate and weaken the statement
6.	"you know, like..."	Hedge	A discourse marker to maintain the flow of interaction
7.	"I was like..."	Hedge	Informal reported speech marker with a mitigating effect
8.	"I thought it'd be fun..."	Hedge	Present an opinion more indirectly and politely

Table 2 shows that hedges represent the second most frequent women's language feature in the data, with eight instances identified. Hedging devices like *I feel like*, *I think*, *kind of*, *like*, and *you know* appear predominantly in moments when the speaker expresses personal opinions, recounts experiences, or introduces evaluative statements. These features function as pragmatic softeners that reduce the directness of the speaker's assertions and invite a more collaborative conversational tone. This finding supports (Holmes, 1995) argument that hedges in women's language should not be interpreted as signs of uncertainty or subordination, but rather as relational strategies for building solidarity and maintaining interpersonal rapport. The hedge *I was like* functions as an informal reported speech marker, a feature characteristic of conversational storytelling that signals the speaker's awareness of her audience. The frequent use of hedges in this interaction reflects a communicative style that prioritizes connection and conversational flow over assertiveness, which is particularly fitting within the interactive and audience-oriented format of a talk show.

Table 3. Distribution of Empty Adjectives, Politeness, and Emotional Expressions.

No.	Utterances	Features	Explanation
1.	"Thank you so, so much."	Intensifier + Politeness	Reinforce politeness.
2.	"It's amazing."	Empty Adjective	Indicates a subjective and evaluative personal judgment.
3.	"Oh my gosh, this is gorgeous."	Empty Adjective	Indicates an expressive and spontaneous emotional evaluation.
4.	"I love you"	Emotional Expression	Expresses affective feelings to build interpersonal connection.

As shown in Table 3, empty adjectives, politeness forms, and emotional expressions, while less frequent than intensifiers and hedges, play a significant role in shaping the affective dimension of the interaction. Empty adjectives like *amazing* and *gorgeous* convey subjective evaluations that reflect the speaker's emotional state. Politeness form *Thank you so, so much* combine intensification with social courtesy, reinforcing the speaker's orientation toward positive interpersonal relations. Emotional expression like *I love you* illustrates the speaker's use of language to build affective bonds in a public media setting. These features contribute to the construction of a warm, expressive, and socially engaged communicative identity. This finding is consistent with (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013) perspective that linguistic behavior is shaped by social context and interactional goals rather than fixed gender roles. The presence of these features in a highly public setting suggests that they function as deliberate resources for performing a socially recognizable feminine identity.

Table 4. Instances of Gossip in the Data.

No.	Utterances	Absent Third Party	Function	Explanation
1.	"My sister Paige got married during the production. I was planning her wedding... with blood all over me."	Sister (Paige)	Social Bonding	Sharing a personal story about an absent family member to create intimacy and entertain the audience.
2.	"Noah and I made 30 friendship bracelets... He sat here the other night. I waited up."	Noah Schnapp (co-star)	Social Bonding	Sharing a positive story about an absent co-star to demonstrate closeness and group cohesion among the cast.
3.	"This is what my friends do. They come over, they pitch theories, put me on the spot."	Friends	Entertainment	A lighthearted commentary about the behavior of absent individuals, used to engage and amuse the audience.
4.	"Winnie's a power play for her. She knows what she's doing. She's like, 'I'm	Dog (Winnie)	Entertainment	Humorous personification of an absent non-human third party to

	going to ignore you until you disappear."			entertain and build rapport with the audience.
5.	"I like to blackmail the directors. I have high school pictures of them... I will release this if you don't tell me what's happening."	Duffer Brothers (directors)	Reputation management	A playful evaluative commentary about absent figures; humorously positioning herself in relation to those with authority.

The instances of gossip identified in Table 4 reveal that gossip in this interaction serves predominantly positive communicative functions: social bonding, entertainment, and reputation management. Rather than reflecting the negative stereotype associated with women's gossip, the identified examples involve humorous personal anecdotes and lighthearted evaluative commentary about absent third parties. The story about her sister Paige's wedding, for instance, functions as a means of social bonding by inviting the audience into the speaker's personal life and. Similarly, the playful commentary about the Duffer Brothers serves a reputation management function by humorously positioning the speaker in relation to those in authority. These findings support (McAndrew, 2014) argument that gossip is a multifaceted communicative practice that serves important social functions. Consistent with (Rosida & Handayani, 2023) observation that the gendered association of gossip with women is socially constructed, the gossip instances in this data do not reflect weakness or negativity, but rather serve as strategic resources for constructing an engaging, personable, and socially connected identity in media discourse.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study aimed to analyze the use of women's language features and gossip by Millie Bobby Brown in *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and to examine how these linguistic practices contribute to the performance of gender in media discourse. The findings revealed the presence of several women's language features, particularly hedges and intensifiers, alongside instances of gossip. The findings revealed the presence of hedges and intensifies, alongside instances of gossip which function as communicative resources supporting interaction, emotional expression, and identity construction within the talk show context.

Women's language and gossip should not be viewed as indicators of linguistic weakness or negative stereotypes. Instead, they serve as context-dependent resources through which speakers construct socially recognizable identities and perform gender in media interaction. This finding supports the sociolinguistic perspective that gender is actively constructed through discourse and social practice.

This study's limitations include a talk show interaction involving one participant. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all female speakers or media contexts. Future research is recommended to investigate a broader range of speakers, media platforms, and interactional settings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language, gender, and media discourse.

REFERENCES

- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4–5), 585–614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & David, C. J. (2023). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches. In *SAGE Publications, Inc.: Vol. Sixth Edit.* <https://medium.com/@arifwicaksanaa/pengertian-use-case-a7e576e1b6bf>
- Doring, M., Garza, A., Goldman, J., Sherr, D., & Turcotte, F. (2025). “Who Said What Now?”: Navigating T.V. Portrayal of Gendered Gossip from 1997-2022. *Languaged Life*. <https://languagedlife.ucla.edu/sociolinguistics/who-said-what-now-navigating-t-v-portrayal-of-gendered-gossip-from-1997-2022/>
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2013). *Language and Gender* (Second Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Fallon, J. (2025). *Millie Bobby Brown was fuming when she found out about Will's superpowers in Stranger Things* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/snvUzd_aZFQ?si=aAqW4RBDRHhsMf04
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, Men, and Politeness*. Longman.
- Jolly, E., & Chang, L. J. (2021). Gossip drives vicarious learning and facilitates social connection. *Current Biology*, 31(12), 2539-2549.e6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.03.090>
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. Harper & Row.
- Majumdar, S., Tewatia, M., Jamkhedkar, D., & Bhatia, K. (2022). “You Don't Know Me so Don't Try to Judge Me”: Gender and Identity Performance on Social Media Among Young Indian Users. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.855947>
- McAndrew, F. T. (2014). How “the gossip” became a woman and how “gossip” became her weapon of choice. *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Competition*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199376377.013.13>
- Nikzad, N. (2023). *The dynamic interplay between society and language*. Translation Excellence. <https://translationexcellence.com/dynamic-interplay-between-society-language/>
- Rosida, I., & Handayani, T. (2023). Women, Gossip, and Film: Social and Cultural Construction on Women's Behavioral Engagement in Gossiping. *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy*, 8(1), 191–203. <https://doi.org/10.13187/ijmil.2023.1.191>

- Santoniccolo, F., Trombetta, T., Paradiso, M. N., & Rollè, L. (2023). Gender and Media Representations: A Review of the Literature on Gender Stereotypes, Objectification and Sexualization. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(10), 5770. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105770>
- Subasi, M. D. N. (2020). The power of man-made language in the construction of gender. *Kesit Akademi Dergisi*, 6(25), 41–56. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/kesit.47770>
- Wardhaugh, R., & Fuller, J. M. (2014). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (7th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.