

*The Language of Female Leadership*  
**Judith Baxter (2010)**

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*Reviewed by Laurel D. Kamada*

Judith Baxter's recent monograph, *The Language of Female Leadership*, addresses real-life interactions affecting all sectors of the business world today. This work focuses on the way women talk (and are talked about) and on how language affects the representation of women in leadership positions. Baxter has taken her earlier work on management talk further by problematizing several timely and important questions for women, corporations and leaders. These questions are: is there indeed a language of female leadership? And how can female leaders utilize language to their advantage and effectiveness to achieve their business goals and become powerful leaders? Baxter employs a very systematic, coherent and easily approachable writing style, providing a well-argued and smooth read. The volume is also well researched and provides references of relevant studies throughout. Using the constructionist theoretical framework that Baxter simply refers to as 'discourse theory', the reader is guided through a logical understanding of poststructuralist discourse analysis.

In the first chapter, Baxter starts out by establishing the general principles and terminologies of leadership language that she later describes in greater detail. She begins by demonstrating how leaders' speech relates to the construction of their leadership identities, including practices and interactions in corporate life. Two important aspects of leadership are covered: 'transactional' and 'transformational' (or relational) styles. The former leadership style refers to pragmatically conducting a series of transactions;

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**Affiliation**

Centre for Advancement of Higher Education, Tokyo, Japan  
email: laurelkamada@hotmail.com

the latter refers to motivating subordinates to transform their self-interests to group-centred goals. Baxter also briefly discusses gendered discourses such as *gender difference*, *masculinization*, and *female emotionality* and *irrationality*. Finally, the three types of corporations central to her analysis are introduced.

Chapter 2 looks at the speech styles and gendered identities that are typical of the classic male-dominated corporation. In this context, leaders are thought of as men and women are considered to be assistants and helpers. Baxter writes:

Men use speech to command and control, to get access to the floor, and once there, to keep it. Men are likely to use language for display purposes, asserting their dominance through verbosity, name-dropping, subtle or overt boasting, and entertainment strategies such as jokes and anecdotes. Women on the other hand are expected to listen and to be amused by men. On the whole, they are expected to agree and support, not to interrupt, challenge or question the authority of men. Leadership language remains masculinised and the property of males in current businesses. (p. 24)

Using a 'dominance' theory perspective, Baxter argues that only a few, limited positions are available to women in male-dominated corporations: the Mother, the Seductress, the Pet, and the Iron Maiden. Next, Baxter shows how sex-role stereotypes are reproduced through the language of masculinized metaphors with the most common being those of war/fighting, sporting, games and mating. A discussion follows of how, under a gender-neutral guise, gendered discourses within the male-dominated corporation work to stereotype and construct gender dominance where men are viewed as 'rational, independent, competitive and confrontational, while *females* are seen as more irrational, dependent, co-operative, passive, and conciliatory' (pp. 43–44).

Chapter 3 looks at how people are expected to speak in the gender-divided corporation, from the perspective of the 'gender-difference' theory. Here males and females are thought to speak differently and thus it is assumed that men and women are best suited to take on different roles. While this type of corporation still hinders the full potential of effective female leadership, it is a better environment for woman than male-dominated corporations. Women are valued equally for their contribution to the corporation on the basis of their 'feminine' qualities, for taking supportive and cooperative roles, for example, and for establishing relationships of personal respect and trust. Baxter examines how popular literature has contributed to upholding the 'different-but-equal' view of gender even as she debunks several of the myths regarding the supposed link between gendered speech styles and miscommunication. More specifically, according to 'difference' theory, men and women are expected to have different leadership styles that are characterized

respectively by task-oriented (transactional) and socio-emotional (transformational) qualities.

In Chapter 4, Baxter uses ‘discourse theory’ to show how language in the gender-multiple corporation is constitutive of all human activity regarding the construction of multiple identities. In this setting, gender is but one feature of a person’s identity. In the *ideal* gender-multiple corporation, the speech styles of men and women do not differ that significantly, and the common sense ideology that normally upholds marginalizing gender discourses can be challenged and changed.

The social constructionist view of gender identities that Baxter uses to frame her study argues that gender is accomplished (or ‘done’) through constant interactions with others. Historically, language use has come to be socially connected with either masculinity or femininity; however, from the perspective of discourse theory, males and females may position themselves within a range of roles that are available to anyone. Baxter offers four reasons why the discourse approach is useful for talking about the language of leadership in gender-multiple corporations: male and female leaders need not use language in fixed traditional ways, but can draw on an array of more flexible gendered speech patterns; awareness of the negative consequences of stereotypical and hegemonic gender views is established; women are granted agency to act and evoke change; women are seen not as powerless, but rather as potentially powerful and/or empowered. Chapter 4 also looks at how leadership language has affected the feminization of male leaders, many of whom have come to use a ‘softer,’ more relational approach to achieve effective leadership. Furthermore, both men and women leaders draw on a wider range of communicative strategies to effect their goals, including ‘masculine’ discursive strategies.

Chapter 5 introduces the first of two case studies examining the discursive strategies of female leaders in less than ideal situations, such as the male-dominated setting. Baxter sums up the gist of the study, ‘individuals constantly “work out” their professional identities in the workplace through language, and this matters because their success or failure can be dependent on it’ (p. 102). The study involved two stages: conducting audio-recorded interviews with 20 male and female business leaders about their perceptions of leadership identities, and observing and recording a series of business meetings.

The findings of the study revealed that men and women ‘use language to “do leadership” effectively’ in similar ways (p. 107), and that both men and women use transactional as well as relational styles of leadership to accomplish their goals. What Baxter found ‘distinctive’ about the female data was that women leaders were very aware of how they needed to use language strategically in order to adjust for their marginalized status: ‘They

expressed how they carried out linguistic work in terms of observing, regulating, policing, reviewing and repairing their spoken contributions within institutional settings ... constantly aiming to prepare, pre-judge or *pre-empt* negative evaluations of their work'(p. 107).

Baxter conceptualizes this extra work that women leaders utilize as 'a double-voiced discourse' that not only works to promote their own agenda, but that simultaneously incorporates the voices and viewpoints of subordinate colleagues. Some of the strategies that female leaders employ in order to negotiate a positive view of themselves to others are: 'warmth of manner, humour, an acceptance of being teased, mitigated commands, forms of politeness and attention to "face needs," and indirect engagement' (p. 112). In male-dominated corporations, women leaders must use this double-voiced discourse to ensure their survival and to avoid hegemonic gendered discourses that negatively stereotype woman leaders. In gender-divided corporations, this double-voiced discourse is more of an 'essential toolkit' which can be used to demonstrate positive features of female leadership, but also problematically reinforces supposed gender differences. Only in gender-multiple corporations are both male and female leaders able to appropriate the double-voiced discourse in order to achieve self-reflective leadership.

Chapter 6 develops the second stage of Baxter's study examining the language of female leadership in the context of a two-day executive meeting of a multinational corporation in UK, chaired and managed by a female director (called 'Jan'). Baxter's purpose was to examine how this woman uses an effective language of leadership in order to successfully conduct the meeting, arguing that this is accomplished through strategic linguistic expertise in the 'double-voiced discourse'. Using interactional sociolinguistics, Baxter's data show that Jan is a more successful, efficient leader when able to separate her two roles as chair (seeking to attain impartiality/fairness) and as leader (seeking to strongly position herself as in charge, in control). Finally, drawing on speech-act theory, micro-linguistic analysis and a discourse approach, Baxter demonstrates how executive women can successfully manage their female subordinates.

In Chapter 7, Baxter offers suggestions for how senior women leaders can achieve success through effective linguistic strategies involving the triangulation of authority, politeness and humour. These linguistic strategies also include the rejection of various traditional discriminatory practices such as sexist language, derogatory terms to describe women, masculinized metaphors, generalizations, gossip and 'mean talk'.

Finally, in Chapter 8, Baxter returns to the research questions she asked at the beginning of the book: 'Is language a reason why female leaders continue to be under-represented at senior levels?' Her answer is 'yes.'

Baxter also answers 'yes' to the question of whether there is a language of female leadership with specific linguistic features, although not in an essentialized way, as *both* men and women 'do leadership' by utilizing transactional as well as relational strategies. Baxter emphasizes that what is distinctive about the language of female leadership is that it can be both context bound and un-fixed depending on the environment in which the female leader interacts.

To sum up, within male-dominated corporations, female leaders use highly self-controlled linguistic strategies and draw on pre-emptive techniques to avoid being thought of negatively. In gender-divided corporations, the language of female leadership is expected to be supportive and cooperative, characteristic of stereotypical female features. Female leaders of gender-multiple corporations are in a position to support their junior women colleagues, to skilfully use relational linguistic strategies to contest negative gendered discourses, and to challenge negative evaluations of women. They are best able to succeed in leadership positions as their corporation has already moved beyond the discourse of female disadvantage.

In conclusion, this work clearly makes a valuable contribution to the field of gender and language in that it provides an original and convincing argument for how women leaders can utilize language strategically to become effective and powerful leaders. Furthermore, this work can also effectively advise corporations on how to effectively recognize, promote and utilize the power potential of women.