Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature

2025 VOLUME: 7 ISSUE: 1

E-ISSN: 2717-9435 Research Article

Submitted: April 21, 2025
Accepted: May 19, 2025

A Sociolinguistic Reading: Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

Senem ÜSTÜN KAYA[1]

Abstract

Linguistic discrimination exists in written and spoken language along with politics, social and economic fields. To demonstrate how some lexical choices might be characterized as feminine or masculine and how they are reflected in a literary text, the current paper provides a linguistic analysis of a play. Susan Glaspell's Trifles (1916) was chosen as an example to answer one important research question: To what extend Deborah Tannen's "rapport-talk" and "report-talk", explained in You Just Don't Understand (1990), could be clarified and exemplified regarding the language differences between men and women in fiction. To determine the gendered bias in language use at the sentence level, selection of grammatical structures and lexical preferences, a close reading of the text was done. The data was gained after the analysis of dialogues between and among female and male characters and excerpts were used to clarify and exemplify six categories, defined by Tannen. Based on the data, there are striking findings, which could exemplify Tannen's ideas on "genderlects". First, female characters (Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters) tend for social connection, seek sympathy and support, use suggestion phrases, and avoid conflict while speaking with other characters. Conversely, male characters (the Count Attorney, the Sheriff and Lewis Hale) seek power, provide facts for status, offer counsel, give orders via imperatives and create conflicts to gain authority and independence. Therefore, this study is significant by providing an example of a sociolinguistic reading to focus on the speech differences between men and women in a literary text.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic, Deborah Tannen, *Trifles*, rapport-talk, report-talk

[1] Assoc. Prof. Dr., Başkent University, Faculty of Education, ELT Department, efesenem@yahoo.com, 0000-0001-6537-9769

Introduction

Language is generally seen as a tool of thought, a transmission system that transfers a thought from one person to another, and linguists are more interested in the models with which language is organized in the mind and how the social structure of human societies reflects language through expression and interpretation (Finegan, 2008, p. 6). The study of language use in various social circumstances is known as "sociolinguistics", which blends sociology and linguistics. Sociolinguistics emerged as a branch of linguistic studies in the early 20th century and gained prominence during the 1960s and 1970s.

As the term indicates, sociolinguistics is an interdisciplinary field that studies the connections between language and society (Veith, 2005, p. 5). Even though the scope and functions of sociolinguistics vary, Achard (1986) clarifies the field as follows:

> What is called 'sociolinguistics' is, in my view, not a topic, nor a sub-division of a topic, but rather a meeting point (or a point of confusion) of three topics with different origins: the 'sociological' question of the place of language in human societies and the social process, the 'linguistic' question of language variations and the problems (supposedly describable in sociological terms) these pose to linguistic theory, and the 'practical' question of the social use of language (learning and teaching, standardization, terminology, context translation, linguistic planning, etc.) (p. 5).

A broad framework that encompasses different language acquisitions can be used to analyze the standard language factors linked to linguistic behaviors, such as gender, youth, elderly, group and professional, and educational language. Social groupings are formed in part by these linguistic attitudes, and each group develops its unique language usage. Language variations are the linguistic forms that emerge from these linguistic processes and categories for language variables include domain-specific or professional language, women's and men's language, youth language, political language, and educational register. As clarified by Labov (1966), the scope of sociolinguistics as:

> In the past few years, there has been considerable programmatic discussion of sociolinguistics at various meetings and symposia. If this term refers to the use of data from the speech community to solve problems of linguistic theory, then I would agree that it applies to the research described here. But sociolinguistics is more frequently used to suggest a new interdisciplinary field-the comprehensive description of the relations of language and society (pp. v-vi).

In its general definition and scope, sociolinguistics, an interdisciplinary field based on the analysis of the relation between language and society, considers language as the dependent variable and social categories as the independent variables to investigate the relationship between language behavior and social categories.

Linguistic discrimination exists in written and spoken language along with politics, social and economic fields. To demonstrate how some lexical choices might be characterized as feminine or masculine and how they are reflected in a literary text, the current paper provides a linguistic

analysis of a play. Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) was chosen as an example to answer one important research question: To what extend Deborah Tannen's "rapport-talk" and "report-talk", explained in *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), could be clarified and exemplified regarding the language differences between men and women in fiction. To determine the gendered bias in language use at the sentence level, selection of grammatical structures and lexical preferences, a close reading of the text was done. The data was gained after the analysis of dialogues between and among female and male characters and excerpts were used to clarify and exemplify six categories, defined by Tannen. Based on the data, there are striking findings, which could exemplify Tannen's ideas on "genderlects". First, female characters (Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters) tend for social connection, seek sympathy and support, use suggestion phrases, and avoid conflict while speaking with other characters. Conversely, male characters (the Count Attorney, the Sheriff and Lewis Hale) seek power, provide facts for status, offer counsel, give orders via imperatives and create conflicts to gain authority and independence. Therefore, this study is significant by providing an example of a sociolinguistic reading to focus on the speech differences between men and women in a literary text.

Literature Review

Gender and language

The disciplines of linguistics, feminist theory, and political practice incorporate the first research on the relationship between language and gender (Weatherall, 2002). Research on the connection between language and gender was initiated by the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The purpose of these studies, which were associated with the women's liberation movement, was to determine the relationship between gender inequalities and language usage. Since then, feminists have been examining how language perpetuates sexism and patriarchy (Coates & Pichler, 2011).

Questions of linguistic diversity and text analysis methodologies have peaked in the 1960s and sociolinguistics has become a subfield of anthropology. Besides, literature serves as a conduit, enabling research into the feelings and thoughts of characters through the comprehension of geographic location, gender dynamics, socioeconomic class, racial group, and interpersonal relationships.

As a branch of sociolinguistics, the analysis of different linguistic variants between men and women clarified the fact that what sets men and women apart, however, is not their biological characteristics but rather their gender-a socially constructed pattern of femininity and masculinity. The overall effect of "women's speech", which encompasses both language used exclusively by women and language that describes women exclusively, will be found to be that it subsumes a woman's personal identity by, on the one hand, preventing her from expressing herself strongly and, on the other, encouraging statements that imply triviality and ambiguity regarding the subject matter, and, when a woman is being discussed, by treating her as an object, whether sexual or not.

The biological difference between males and females is only one aspect of the gender factor. The roles that are allocated to men and women are the first step towards the status of being male or female and the connotations that go along with it. A person's biological distinctions become variances influenced by gender roles, which then acquire a social identity guided by education. In general, the biological distinctions between men and women are referred to as gender, however there are two categories of gender in sociolinguistics: biological and social.

The women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought the linguistic approach to gender, which in turn led to the development of feminist linguistics. Some sociologists and anthropologists have recently examined the ways in which men and women use their respective languages for communication, and they have seen this area as crucial to comprehending the differences between the sexes. Language and gender are among the many topics covered by sociolinguistics, according to Holmes (2008). In every language community, the degree to which men and women use different languages varies (p. 157). It would be proper to remember that there is no significant relationship between this differentiation and the object's characteristics. However, some languages have specific terms and constructs that are only used by men or women. These linguistic forms must be learned by every child during the socialization process. When it comes to defining social identities, these examples are essential. The terms and phrases that are used in society to refer to men and women are further instances that have been studied in sociolinguistics in terms of language and identity.

Research on language and gender became prominent after the 1970s, when women's movements became prominent. Language researchers known as sociolinguists distinguish between two types of women's writing and language: writing by women and writing about women (König, 1992, p. 26). Furthermore, the language used to discuss women frequently carries negative connotations. The physiological and psychological distinctions between men and women lead to differences in speech. To put it another way, men are more likely to be independent and to be interested in vertical relationships, which means they want power and hierarchy. Conversely, women enjoy interacting with others and have less authority than men.

Many people believe that Robin Lakoff's "Language and Woman's Place" (1972), along with some of her earlier research, marked the beginning of the study of gender and language in sociolinguistics and gender studies in the United States in the 1970s (Bucholtz, 2004). Deborah Tannen, Penelope Eckert, Janet Holmes, Mary Bucholtz, Kira Hall, Deborah Cameron, Jane Sunderland, etc. were the other notable scholars who studied gender and sociolinguistics and others. A hypothesis based on gendered communication styles is made possible by the notion that men and women differ from one another. Key distinctions between the two communication styles, known as masculine and feminine, are described and categorized in *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) by Deborah Tannen who foregrounded "difference theory" throughout the end of the 20th century.

Deborah Tannen and "rapport-talk" and "report-talk"

In the "Preface" of her book, *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), Deborah Tannen states her aim as a linguist, who dealt with male and female language, as follows:

> Each person's life is lived as a series of conversations. Analyzing everyday conversations, and their effects on relationships, has been the focus of my career as a sociolinguist. In this book I listen to the voices of women and men. I make sense of seemingly senseless misunderstandings that haunt our relationships and show that a man and a woman can interpret the same conversation differently, even when there is no apparent misunderstanding.

By coining the term "genderlects", Tannen (1990) underscores the differences of language between genders: "We try to talk to each other honestly, but it seems at times that we are speaking different languages-or at least different genderlects" (p. 42). Differentiating men and women as belonging to distinct "sub-cultures" because they have been socialized to do so since childhood is the two cultures (or difference model) approach to equality: "If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different genderlects" (Tannen, 1990, p. 18).

Tannen's cross-cultural perspective on gender disparities diverges from a large body of feminist research that holds that male-female interactions reflect men's attempts to control women. Based on her research on gender reflections on language, Tannen concludes that women utilize a "rapport style" that is more focused on establishing and preserving connections, while men tend to employ a "report style" that aims to convey information:

> Who talks more, then, women or men? The seemingly contradictory evidence is reconciled by the difference between what I call public and private speaking. More men feel comfortable doing "public speaking," while more women feel comfortable doing "private" speaking" …. For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships …For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order… (Tannen, 1990, p. 76).

Tannen's "difference theory" is summarized into six categories to exemplify and clarify the contrasting uses of language by men and women (Talbot, 1998, p. 98). The first category is *status versus connection* in asymmetrical roles:

> The difference between public and private speaking, or report-talk and rapport-talk, can be understood in terms of status and connection. It is not surprising that women are most comfortable talking when they feel safe and close, among friends and equals, whereas men feel comfortable talking when there is a need to establish and maintain their status in a group (Tannen, 1990, p. 45).

According to Tannen, women view the world as a network of connections and use language to both seek and aid, while men view it as a competitive environment where speech and conversation are used to elevate status. This illustrates how men are concerned with status while women want human connection: "Men are more often inclined to focus on the jockeying

for status in a conversation: Is the other person trying to be one-up or put me down? Is he trying to establish a dominant position by getting me to do his bidding? Women are more often attuned to the negotiation of connections: Is the other person trying to get closer or pull away?" (Tannen, 1990, p. 16).

Based on this category, Tannen asserts that men ask the first and longer questions (Tannen, 1990, p. 36) and they desire dominance/status in a conversation. Hence, men avoid long period listening because they do not want to be the subordinate while women want to listen and respond questions positively to preserve connection (Tannen, 1990, p. 69). Moreover, men like interrupting or switching the topic both to gain status or to show that they are" bored by women's topics" (Tannen, 1990, p. 70). However, Tannen claims that "women' language" is "powerless" (Tannen, 1990, p. 111).

The second category is called by Tannen as *information versus feelings*, which refers to the theory that men talk about facts while women's speech involves feelings: "Since women seek to build rapport, they are inclined to play down their expertise rather than display it. Since men value the position of center stage and the feeling of knowing more, they seek opportunities to gather and disseminate factual information" (Tannen, 1990, p. 60). Men, for Tannen, tell stories in which they are the protagonists/heroes and aim at giving messages. Conversely, women "tell stories about themselves, about other women, and about men" (Tannen, 1990, p. 87).

As men consider themselves superior, providing information is essential in their speech whereas women focus on connection and intimacy. Besides, "some men resist receiving information from others, especially women, and some women are cautious about stating information that they know, especially to men" (Tannen, 1990, p. 29). Hitherto, women use hedges (uh-huh, mmm, right) and tag questions to avoid any disagreement: "Whereas women's cooperative overlaps frequently annoy men by seeming to cooperate their topic, men frequently annoy women by usurping or switching the topic" (Tannen, 1990, p. 212). *Advice versus understanding* is the third category, and according to Tannen, men look for solutions and tend to give advice while women need consolation and empathy:

> Men look for solutions while women need no advice and ask and talk more in private talks. Trying to solve a problem or fix a trouble focuses on the message level of talk. But for most women who habitually report problems at work or in friendships, the message is not the main point of complaining. It's the meta message that counts: Telling about a problem is a bid for an expression of understanding ("I know how you feel") or a similar complaint ("I felt the same way when something similar happened to me"). Women are frustrated when they not only don't get this reinforcement but, quite the opposite, feel distanced by the advice (Tannen, 1990, p. 23).

Therefore, women are distanced or alienated when they could not get the reinforcement to be understood. The fourth category is *orders versus proposals*. According to Tannen (1990), men like being the center of attention by telling jokes or stories while women suggest for intimacy. As explained by Tannen (1990), "men preferred and were more likely to tell jokes when they had an audience: at least two, often four or more…Unlike men, they[women] were reluctant to tell jokes in front of people they didn't know well" (p. 43). Hence, men tend to use imperatives

("Close the door", "turn on the light") and women propose ("Let's", "Shall we...?" How about…?") while speaking because "they are more concerned that they be liked" (Tannen, 1990, p. 18-19).

Conflict versus compromise is the fifth category, and for Tannen, men create conflicts to show their superiority or to boast while women avoid any conflict and preserve rapport: "males are competitive and prone to conflict whereas females are cooperative and given to affiliation…To most women, conflict is a threat to connection, to be avoided at all costs" (Tannen, 1990, p. 150). However, for men conflict is required for status whereas many women avoid "confrontation" (Tannen, 1990, p. 90).

Finally, *independence versus intimacy*, is another difference between the language of men and women. Men want independence while women want intimacy, and for Tannen (1990), "women's longing for intimacy threatens men's desire for freedom" (Tannen, 1990, p. 385). Tannen asserts that women, seeing the world as a network of connections and relationships, possess intimacy in conversations by minimizing differences and trying to enhance consensus whereas men, "independence is key, because a primary means of establishing status is to tell others what to do, and taking orders is a marker of low status" (Tannen, 1990, p. 10). In other words, men avoid consulting while making decisions while women "expect decisions to be discussed first and made by consensus" (Tannen, 1990, p. 10).

Analysis

At the height of the American Women's Suffrage Movement, Susan Glaspell's one-act play, *Trifles* (1916) is a feminist drama that reflects the complexity of women's hectic lives and challenges preconceived ideas about their lack of social influence, limited with their domestic roles. The play is "experimental in technique and puts forth in a moving way the plight of a woman brutalized by her husband-a woman who never appears in the play" according to Yvonne Shafer (2010, p. 78). Although Glaspell's play initially appears to have a typical detective plot, it delves deeper into the psychology of women who are suppressed by Midwest America's domesticated farming culture. According to Carter (1984) women were "decorative, and useful in the home, but that's all" (p. 188) during the beginning of the 20th century American culture. Most of the women's time was spent on cooking, doing laundry, and sewing in the kitchen, where they were confined.

One of those women who lost their freedom and individual rights was Minnie Foster, who played the role of Minnie Wright in Susan Glaspell's most well-known one-act play. Roles, duties, epithets, physical traits and responsibilities of men and women differ at the very early ages, either by the cultural impacts (societal coding) or biological traces almost in all cultures. Therefore, this study scrutinizes the language differences between male and female characters in Glaspell's *Trifles* in accordance with the above-mentioned theories of Deborah Tannen.

The play starts while Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters try to tidy the kitchen of Minnie Wright while their husbands are investigating the murder of her husband, John. Although the men in the play

mock women for fixating on "trifles" (trivial, womanly concerns), women discover the evidence that indicate that Mrs. Wright had probably killed her husband. Although Mrs. Wright was the only suspect in her husband's murder due to the lack of evidence, she was not considered a suspect by the Sheriff, the county attorney, or Mr. Hale, the neighboring farmer. Still, she was considered a prisoner. Without questioning Mrs. Hale or the Sheriff's wife, these three male characters were executed with blatant prejudice against Minnie, who had been arrested. When the two women went to the kitchen to look for clues regarding the alleged strangling of Mr. Wright, the male authorities, particularly the county attorney, humiliated them because they were unable to prove the motive while investigating the murder.

Glaspell gives voice to Minnie, who is the target of the men's criticism and biases while Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, other female characters, attempt to decipher the clues. Hitherto, the play represents an errand into "a narrative that is previously masculine in content", for "the (male) detective has not solved a mystery, and the answer lies with a woman" (Sussex, 2010, p. 1). When Mr. Hale enters the house and begins to recount the crime that occurred the day before, the female characters begin their errand. Even though he describes every detail of what he saw the day before his current account, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale silently take charge of the investigation by closely examining the clues in the kitchen.

The kitchen, which is constantly in the spotlight but is occasionally overlooked, is the play's first significant gender division. For a close look, only the female characters remain in the kitchen. The kitchen is never given much thought by the other two male characters because, to them, it is a place reserved for women and is unimportant for them. As a result, not only do men view the kitchen as a place for women, but women also view it as their own space. The sole distinction between these two perspectives is that, although men view it as a place of little importance, women view it as their space for independence, unhindered by the dominance of patriarchal power.

Methodology

This part of the study involves the analysis of the differences between male and female characters in Susan Glaspell's one-act play *Trifles*, regarding Deborah Tannen's "genderlect" theory. The dialogues were selected to illustrate Tannen's theoretical concepts. Hence, in some parts, examples are given by considering the most striking types of speech between genders and more than one type of genderlect could be observed in the same dialogues.

Findings and Discussion

Status versus connection:

In contrast to men, who see the world as a competitive environment where speech and conversation are used to elevate status, women see it as a network of connections and use language to both seek and aid (Tannen, 1990, p. 24–25). Tannen's theory indicates that women listen and respond positively for connection and cooperation while men are more likely to interrupt, avoid listening and ask questions to gain power and status over other speakers. Below

are the examples of dialogues from *Trifles*, regarding status and connection difference male and female characters:

1. MRS.HALE: I don't think a place'd be any cheerfuler for John Wright's being in it.

COUNT ATTORNEY: I'd like to talk more of that a little later… [avoid listening to women]

2. MRS. PETERS: Why, here's a birdcage. Did she have a bird, Mrs. Hale?

MRS. HALE: Why, I don't know whether she did or not…

MRS. PETERS: I s'pose maybe the cat got it. [cooperative overlaps between women]

3. SHERIFF: Now, Mr. Hale, before we move things about, you explain to Mr. Henderson just what you saw when you came here yesterday morning.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: By the way, has anything been moved? Are things just as you left them yesterday? [In this dialogue, Count Attorney tends to dominate the conversation by switching the topic].

4. MRS. PETERS. (nervously). I don't think we ought to touch things.

MRS. HALE. I'll just finish up this end. (Suddenly stopping and leaning forward.) Mrs. Peters? [responding positively]

5. COUNT ATTORNEY: Well, ladies, have you decided whether she was going to quilt or knot it? [asking questions]

MRS. PETERS: We think she was going to-knot it. [responding positively]

The above dialogues illustrate the theoretical concepts of Tannen who stated that men are raised in a society where having a discussion is frequently a competition to gain power while women consider conversations as a way of exchanging affirmation and encouragement.

The dialogues clarify how the male characters seek **status** and dominance. Count Attorney, for instance, avoids listening to Mrs. Hale, changes the subject and dominates over the Sheriff by switching the topic. On the other hand, female characters try to create **connection** while speaking with others. To exemplify, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters develop cooperative overlap by responding each other positively. Therefore, the dialogues of female characters reflect female solidarity, which aligns with Tannen's notion of "rapport talk".

Information versus feelings:

Tannen (1990) states that men discuss facts, devise strategies, inform the listener, and tell stories in which they are the hero. Men's conversations are message-oriented, they frequently change topics, and they detest interruptions and receiving information from women. Conversely, women are cautious while giving information and narrate stories about others and

their conversations are essential to strengthen bonds. That's why, women frequently use hedges (umm, hmmm, right) and tag questions to enhance social ties:

1. HALE: Harry and I had started to town with a load of potatoes. We came along the road from my place; and as I got here, I said, "I'm going to see if I can't get John Wright to go in with me on a party telephone." I spoke to Wright about it once before, and he put me off, saying folks talked too much anyway, and all he asked was peace and quiet-I guess you know about how much he talked himself; but I thought maybe if I went to the house and talked about it before his wife, though I said to Harry that I didn't know as what his wife wanted made much difference to John… I got a feeling that I ought to make some conversation, so I said I had come in to see if John wanted to put in a telephone, and at that she started to laugh, and she stopped and looked at me-scared… [telling stories in which they are the hero/protagonist]

2. COUNTY ATTORNEY: …. before we move things about, you explain to Mr Henderson just what you saw…I guess we'll go upstairs first—and then out to the barn and around there. (To the Sheriff). You're convinced that there was nothing important here-nothing that would point to any motive? [developing strategy]

3. MRS. HALE (examining the skirt): Wright was close. I think maybe that's why she kept so much to herself. She didn't even belong to the Ladies' Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn't do her part, and then you don't enjoy things when you feel shabby. She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that-oh, that was thirty years ago. This all you was to take?

MRS. PETERS: She said she wanted an apron. Funny thing to want, for there isn't much to get you dirty in jail, goodness knows. But I suppose just to make her feel more natural. She said they was in the top drawer in this cupboard. Yes, here. And then her little shawl that always hung behind the door. (Opens stair door and looks.) Yes, here it is. (Quickly shuts door leading upstairs.)

[Women both support each other while feeling sympathy for Minnie].

4. MRS. HALE: It's log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn't it?

MRS. HALE: My sister Bessie was like that. Queer, ain't it?

MRS. HALE: It would, wouldn't it? [tag questions]

5. MRS. HALE: I don't like this place.

MRS. PETERS: But I'm awful glad you came with me, Mrs. Hale. It would be lonesome of me sitting here alone. [social connection through feelings]

6. MRS. HALE: I wish you'd seen Minnie Foster when she wore a white dress with blue ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang. (A look around the room). Oh, I wish I'd come over here once in a while! That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that? [feelings for Minnie]

7. MRS. PETERS: My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting all stirred up over a little thing like a-dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with-with-wouldn't they laugh!

(The men are heard coming downstairs.)

8. HALE. Why, I don't think she minded—one way or other. She didn't pay much attention. I said, "How do, Mrs. Wright, it's cold, ain't it?" And she said, "Is it?"—and went on kind of pleating at her apron. Well, I was surprised; she didn't ask me to come up to the stove, or to set down, but just sat there, not even looking at me, so I said, "I want to see John." And then she-laughed. I guess you would call it a laugh. I thought of Harry and the team outside, so I said a little sharp. "Can't I see John?" "No," she says, kind o' dull like. "Ain't he home?" says I. "Yes," says she, "he's home." "Then why can't I see him?" I asked her, out of patience. "'Cause he's dead," says she. "Dead?" says I. She just nodded her head, not getting a bit excited, but rockin' back and forth. "Why-where is he?" says I, not knowing what to say. She just pointed upstairs-like that (himself pointing to the room above). I got up, with the idea of going up there. I talked from there to here-then I says, "Why, what did he die of?" "He died of a rope around his neck," says she, and just went on pleatin' at her apron. Well, I went out and called Harry. I thought I might-need help. We went upstairs, and there he was lying'

MRS. HALE (under her breath). Maybe they would-maybe they wouldn't. [declaration of feelings]

In the above excerpts, it is apparent that male characters enhance **information** by giving details and narrating the stories in which they are the protagonists. the County Attorney develop strategies, the Sheriff explains the events in detail and the witness Hale narrates what he has observed in long sentences.

Conversely, female characters are more emotional and focus on **feelings.** For example, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters tend to narrate stories of Minnie Foster and her marriage, express more feelings, use hedges (umm, hmmm, right) and prefer tag questions to enhance social ties.

Advice-understanding:

According to Tannen (1990), women seek comfort, consolation and empathy ("I know how you feel…" "I also had the same feeling….") while men give advice and seek a solution to problems. Women, therefore, require understanding rather than advice and they tend to talk more than males in private conversations.

1. MRS. PETERS: She had bread set.

MRS. HALE: she was going to put this in there. It's a shame about her fruit. I wonder if it's all gone. I think there's some here that's all right, Mrs. Peters. Yes-here; (Holding it toward the window.) This is cherries, too. (Looking again.) I declare I believe that's

the only one. She'll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer.

MRS. HALE: Well, I don't see any signs of anger around here. It's wiped here. Wonder how they are finding things upstairs? I hope she had it a little more there. You know, it seems kind of sneaking. Locking her up in town and then coming out here and trying to get her own house to turn against her! [understanding of how others feel]

2. MRS. HALE: But I tell you what I do wish, Mrs. Peters. I wish I had come over sometimes she was here. I- (Looking around the room.)-wish I had.

MRS. PETERS: But of course you were awful busy, Mrs. Hale--your house and your children.

MRS. HALE: I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful-and that's why I ought to have come. I-I've never liked this place. Maybe because it's down in a hollow, and you don't see the road. I dunno what it is, but it's a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes. I can see now… (Shakes her head.)

MRS. PETERS: Well, you mustn't reproach yourself, Mrs. Hale. Somehow we just don't see how it is with other folks until—something comes up. [understanding of others]

3. MRS. PETERS: When I was a girl-my kitten-there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes-and before I could get there...If they hadn't held me back, I would have hurt him. [empathy]

4. COUNTY ATTORNEY. Here's a nice mess.

(The women draw nearer.)

MRS. PETERS (to the other woman). Oh, her fruit; it did freeze. (To the Lawyer). She worried about that when it turned so cold. She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.

SHERIFF. Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

COUNTY ATTORNEY. I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

HALE. Well, women are used to worrying over trifles.

As stated by Tannen, men find it difficult to come up with a solution for a complaint and they favour giving **advice** rather than taking whereas women prefer **consideration** rather than receiving advice. In the play, as is seen in the above dialogues, while Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters try to understand Minnie's annoyances and depression while the Count Attorney judges the messy kitchen without considering what Mrs. Wright (Minnie) has been through.

Orders versus proposals:

As stated by Tannen (1990), women propose and suggest (Let's, Would you mind? Shall we?) and use hypercorrect grammar while men give orders by using imperatives:

> 1. COUNTY ATTORNEY: This feels good. Come up to the fire, ladies. [imperative]
>
> 2. MRS. PETERS: Oh, her fruit; it did freeze..She said the fire'd go out and her jars would break.
>
> SHERIFF: Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves [jokes]
>
> 3. MRS. PETERS: Well, I must get those things from the front room closet. You coming with me, Mrs. Hale? You could help me carry them.
>
> MRS. PETERS: My, it's cold in there [nice and polite requests]
>
> 4. MRS. HALE: If I was you, I wouldn't tell her her fruit was gone. (proposal)
>
> The excerpts demonstrate how male characters use imperatives for **orders** and female characters tend to propose. Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale frequently make indirect **suggestions** and prefer a cooperation both in acts and conversations. However, the County Attorney uses imperatives and frequently give orders and the Sheriff makes irritating jokes about Minnie.

Conflict versus compromise:

For Tannen (1990), women are extremely courteous, but men instigate disputes to boast or demonstrate their superiority. To maintain goodwill and rapport, most women consider conflict as a threat to their relationships while men are more likely to use confrontation to resolve conflicts and to negotiate status (p. 149-151). That's why, women are politer than men and they use hedges and tag questions more:

> 1. SHERIFF (looking about): It's just the same. When it dropped below zero last night, I thought I'd better send Frank out this morning to make a fire for us-no use getting pneumonia with a big case on; but I told him not to touch anything except the stove-and you know Frank.
>
> COUNTY ATTORNEY: Somebody should have been left here yesterday.
>
> SHERIFF: Oh-yesterday. When I had to send Frank to Morris Center for that man who went crazy-I want you to know I had my hands full yesterday. I knew you could get back from Omaha by today, and if I went over everything here myself… [Count Attorney creates conflict with Sheriff]
>
> 2. COUNTY ATTORNEY: And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies? Dirty towels! Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?
>
> MRS. HALE: There's a great deal of work to be done on a farm.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: To be sure. And yet… (With a little bow to her.) … I know there are some Dickson county farmhouses which do not have such roller towels. (He gives it a pull to expose its full length again.)

MRS. HALE: Those towels get dirty awful quick. Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: Ah, loyal to your sex, I see. But you and Mrs. Wright were neighbors… [men create conflict while women need confrontation]

3. MRS. HALE: I'd hate to have men coming into my kitchen, snooping around and criticizing.

MRS. PETERS: Of course it's no more than their duty.

MRS. HALE: Duty's all right…[women compromise with each other to reach consensus].

4. MRS. PETERS: But, Mrs. Hale, the law is the law.

MRS. HALE: I s'pose 'tis.[confrontation]

5. COUNTY ATTORNEY: Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked up. (Moves a few things about, disturbing the quilt pieces which cover the box. Steps back.) No, Mrs. Peters doesn't need supervising. For that matter, a sheriff's wife is married to the law. Ever think of it that way, Mrs. Peters?

MRS. PETERS: Not-just that way. [unlike the women who try to have sincere, kind and supportive dialogues, men try to show dominance over the listener.]

The selected dialogues align with Tannen's theory, indicating that men are fond of creating conflicts to gain status and dominance over others while women desire compromise and avoid conflicts.

The Count Attorney creates **conflict** with the Sheriff by stating that "Somebody should have been left here yesterday" to complain about the cold kitchen. It is also obvious that the Sheriff tries to defend himself: "I want you to know I had my hands full yesterday". On the other hand, almost in all conversations between Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, it is apparent that women are in pursuit of **confrontation** (compromise) and avoid conflicts.

Independence versus intimacy:

According to Tannen (1990), women desire intimacy, try to reach consensus to avoid superiority while men require independence (p. 385) and decide without consulting to gain status. Moreover, intensifiers (so, very) are frequently used by women:

1.MRS. HALE: Mrs. Peters?

MRS. PETERS: Do you think she did it?

MRS. HALE: Oh, I don't know.

MRS. PETERS: Well, I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit.

MRS. HALE: Well, I guess John Wright didn't wake when they was slipping that rope under his neck.

MRS. PETERS: No, it's strange. It must have been done awful crafty and still. They say it was such a - funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that.

MRS. HALE: That's just what Mr. Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that's what he can't understand.

MRS. PETERS: Mr. Henderson said coming out that what was needed for the case was a motive; something to show anger or—sudden feeling. [intimacy between women]

2.MRS. PETERS: We don't know who killed the bird.

MRS. HALE: I knew John Wright.

MRS. PETERS: It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs. Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him.

MRS. HALE: His neck, Choked the life out of him.

(Her hand goes out and rests on the birdcage.)

MRS. PETERS: We don't know who killed him. We don't know. [intimacy and consensus]

3. COUNTY ATTORNEY: I'm going to stay here awhile by myself (To the Sheriff). You can send Frank out for me, can't you? I want to go over everything. I'm not satisfied that we can't do better. [independent choices]

4. COUNT ATTORNEY: Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to-what is it you call it, ladies?

MRS. HALE: We call it-knot it, Mr. Henderson. [intimate use of "we"]

The above excerpts exemplify Tannen's observations on how women support and maintain intimacy in their speech while men are more likely to emphasize independence because they are more concerned about status.

During the play, when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are left in the kitchen while men seek evidence in the crime scene, there is cooperation and **intimacy** between them. They work, speak and decide together. Conversely, men tend to be more **independent** in their decisions and lack of consensus in their conversations with others. The Count Attorney decides "to stay" in the house alone while women decide to hide the evidence by calling it "knot".

Conclusion

Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* is ground-breaking in terms of modern understandings of gender, feminism, and spatial discussions in addition to being revolutionary in terms of the status of

the American women in the 19th century. Although the play's major gendered division is the kitchen, where female characters are left by men who investigate the crime scene, there are also striking speech differences between the male and the female characters in the play.

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* was examined in this study using Deborah Tannen's theories from *You Just Don't Understand* (1990). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the degree to which Tannen's "genderlects" could be found in a literary work. The information was gathered following the examination of conversations between and among male and female characters, and passages were utilized to illustrate and explain each of Tannen's "rapport-talk" and "report-talk" categories. This study could help us understand how Glaspell employed conversational methods to highlight power dynamics between the male and female characters in Trifles, even though the play was written before Tannen's theories on gender disparities between men and women emerged.

Based on the data from the play, the dialogues between and among male and female characters illustrate the theoretical concepts of Tannen's "rapport-talk" and "report-talk". The conversations make clear how the male players want for rank and power by ignoring listening, shifting the conversation, and switching topics. Conversely, female characters try to establish a rapport when conversing with others. Secondly, male characters augment information more by providing details and narrating the stories in which they play the main characters, but female characters are more sentimental and emotional about Minnie Foster. Third, female characters in the play require thought rather than counsel, while many men struggle to solve problems and prefer to offer advise rather than accept it. Also, female characters typically make proposals while male characters utilize imperatives to provide commands. As a fifth remark of the analysis, it is apparent that women prefer cooperation in both actions and talks, but men offer direct ideas and make jokes about Minnie's kitchen. Finally, men are more independent while giving decisions whereas women act, speak and decide together.

All in all, it would not be wrong to state that the dialogues of women and men in *Trifles* indicate the message of the writer in the deeper structure: women are emotionally, physically and verbally isolated, alienated and accepted as inferior when compared to men who dominate and oppress women. From a sociological perspective, ironically, Glaspell's message-that women who are confined to public spaces in male-dominated societies are just as resourceful and intelligent as men-allows female characters left in the kitchen to handle trivial tasks and solve the murder mystery while men investigate the crime scene.

References

Achard, P. (1986). Analyse de discours et sociologie du langage. *Langage et Société*, 37, 5-60.

Bucholtz, M. (2004). Editor's introduction. In R. Lakoff & M. R. Bucholtz (Eds.), *Language and woman's place: text and commentaries* (pp. 3- 14). New York: Oxford University Press.

Carter, R. (1984). *First lady from plains*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Coates, J. & Pichler, P. (2011). *Language and gender*: A reader. UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Finegan, E. (2008). *Language, its structure and use*. Boston, USA: Thomsen Wadsworth

Glaspell, S. (1987). *Trifles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holmes, J. (2008). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. England: Pearson Education Limited.

König, G. (1992). Dil ve cins kadın ve erkeklerin dil kullanımı. *Dilbilim Araştırmaları*, 3, 25-36.

Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society*, 2(1), 45-80. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4166707

Shafer, Y. (2010). O'Neill, Glaspell and John Reed: Anti-war, pro-American reformers. *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, 32, 70-85.

Sussex, L. (2010). *Women writers and detectives in nineteenth-century crime fiction: The mothers of the mystery genre.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Talbot, M. M. (1998). *Language and gender: An introduction*. Cambridge:Polity Press.

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Veith, W. (2005). *Soziolinguistik: Ein arbeitsbuch mit 104 abbildungen, kontrollfragen und antworten.* Auflage: Gunter Narr Verlag.

Weatherall, A. (2002). *Gender, language and discourse*. England: Routledge.