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Speaking Power: Gendered Representations of Authority in Televised Political Interviews

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Abstract
In today's media-driven world, the way political figures are spoken to, and about, on screen has a real impact on how we see leadership. This study takes a close look at televised political interviews to explore how gender and authority are shaped through language. By examining interviews with both male and female politicians from global news outlets, the research uncovers a pattern: women are more likely to be interrupted, asked emotionally charged questions, or framed in ways that subtly question their competence, while men are often allowed to speak freely and are portrayed as confident and authoritative. These differences are not always intentional, but they reflect deeper social beliefs about what a leader should "sound" like. Using tools from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) , the paper highlights how everyday language can either uphold or challenge traditional power structures. In doing so, it calls for more thoughtful and equitable communication in journalism, especially as conversations around gender and representation continue to grow louder around the world.

Keywords: CDA; SFL; gender bias; leadership; media discourse.

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1. Introduction

We live in a world where media is everywhere, shaping not only how we receive information, but also how we understand authority, leadership, and public presence. Among the most telling spaces where these dynamics unfold are televised political interviews. These moments, part performance, part

interrogation, offer a glimpse into how power is both exercised and portrayed. But power isn't just about what is said. It is also about *how* it is said, and *to whom*. And increasingly, scholars are asking: does gender change the rules of this game? Over the years, researchers have noticed some recurring patterns in how female politicians are treated in the media, especially during interviews. Women in politics are often interrupted more frequently, asked more emotionally loaded or personal questions, and sometimes subtly framed as less capable than their male colleagues (Trimble et al., 2015; Krook & O'Brien, 2012). These moments may seem small on their own, but together they reveal underlying biases in how we, as a society, tend to perceive leadership Islam (2023). In many ways, language becomes a mirror reflecting who we think fits into positions of power, and who still has to prove they belong (Tahsini, & Duci, 2022).

This paper steps into that conversation by asking a simple but important question: how does language reinforce, or resist, those gendered expectations in political interviews? To explore this, I analysed real interviews aired on major international news outlets, looking closely at how both male and female politicians are spoken to and how they respond. I relied on two frameworks to guide the analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which helps unpack the power dynamics in everyday talk (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2015), and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which examines how meaning is shaped by choices in wording, tone, and structure (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

At a time when conversations around gender equality and media responsibility are gaining momentum, looking closely at these interviews feels more important than ever. They may seem like routine parts of political life, but they carry weight, often shaping how audiences think about leadership, authority, and credibility. With this study, I hope to open up space for more thoughtful

dialogue about how power is performed through language, and how it might be shared more fairly.

1.1. Objectives

The research aims to understand the subtle yet powerful ways in which language can either reinforce or challenge gendered expectations of leadership. Rather than assuming that authority is communicated in the same way by all speakers, or received equally by all audiences, this study takes a closer look at how male and female politicians are spoken to, interrupted, and framed in public discourse. More specifically, the objectives of this study are:

- to examine how gender influences the language of political interviews**,** particularly in terms of interruptions, questioning styles, and speech patterns
- to identify recurring linguistic features that position male and female political figures differently with regard to perceived authority and competence
- to explore how strategies in news media discourse interviews reflect or resist cultural norms about leadership, power, and gender
- to contribute to broader discussions about equity in media representation**,** by offering a nuanced, linguistically grounded understanding of how language shapes public perceptions of leadership

1.2. Research Questions

To guide the analysis, the study is structured around the following specific questions:

1) How male and female political figures are linguistically positioned in televised interviews?

2) What differences can be observed in how interviewers engage with politicians based on gender, such as through interruptions, tone, or framing?
3) How do these linguistic patterns contribute to broader narratives about authority, credibility, and leadership?
4) In what ways might these patterns reflect cultural assumptions about gender and power, and where do we see resistance or change?

2. Literature Review

The intersection of language, gender, and authority has long been a site of rich academic inquiry. Scholars across linguistics, media studies, and gender studies have explored how speech is not just a neutral medium but a powerful tool, used to build, challenge, or affirm authority in different social contexts. When it comes to political communication, and particularly televised political interviews, these dynamics become especially visible.

Over the past few decades, research has consistently shown that women in positions of political power face a different communicative landscape than men. They are often evaluated not only on what they say, but also *how* they say it, and how they are spoken to. Classic studies by Lakoff (1975) and later Tannen (1994) laid the groundwork for understanding the gendered dimensions of speech, suggesting that women's language tends to be interpreted as less assertive or authoritative due to cultural conditioning rather than linguistic ability. The theme is strengthened by recent studies, e.g. Sharma and Patel (2024), Nazeer et al. (2024), Lee and Thompson (2024), Tanabe (2025).

Recent studies have shown that the way the media talks about male and female politicians is not always equal (Riduansyah et al., 2024). For instance, Trimble and colleagues (2015) found that women running for office are often described in more emotional or personal terms, while men are usually framed as

logical and policy-driven. This imbalance often carries over into political interviews, where women are interrupted more often or asked tougher, sometimes even moralistic, questions (Krook & O'Brien, 2012). These subtle differences in treatment can influence how audiences perceive who sounds more competent or 'leader-like'. But power in language is not just about holding a big title, it is also about how people use words to show authority. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), through Systemic Functional Linguistics, explain that language always reflects the social setting it's used in. In political interviews, this plays out in how people take turns speaking, what tone they use, and how their responses are framed. Scholars like Fairclough (2013) and van Dijk (2015), working in Critical Discourse Analysis, argue that these patterns in language often reflect bigger social issues, including beliefs about gender and power. Researchers like Clayman (2002) have also pointed out that male politicians often get more space to speak without being interrupted, while women tend to be challenged more and sometimes feel pressured to adopt a firmer, more traditionally 'masculine' way of speaking just to be taken seriously (Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014). And when women do appear in the media, their roles are often framed around their appearance, emotions, or families, rather than their ideas or leadership (Riduansyah et al., 2024; Brugnoli et al., 2022; Ross & Carter, 2011; van Zoonen, 1998). The female politicians get less mentions and acknowledgements by the hosts and anchors (Jain, & Mondal, 2023). This kind of framing can make it harder for female leaders to be seen as equally authoritative. This framing issue is further complicated by intersectionality. Even this biasness goes beyond media into the judiciary (Cai et al., 2025). As Crenshaw (1989) reminds us, gender does not exist in a vacuum. Race, class, and other social markers also affect how authority is constructed and received. While this study primarily focuses on gender, it acknowledges the need for more intersectional analyses in future work.

Despite growing interest in these issues, there remains a need for more detailed, linguistically informed studies that focus on actual language use in media settings. Much of the existing work relies on content analysis or media critique, without closely examining the discourse structures at play during interviews. By applying tools from both SFL and CDA, this study aims to fill that gap, offering a grounded analysis of how language works to sustain or subvert authority in political interviews across genders.

Moreover, while many studies focus on political campaigns or speeches, relatively few concentrate on interview dynamics, where power is actively negotiated in real time. This study brings those moments to the fore, showing how everyday interactions can reflect, and challenge, larger systems of inequality.

3. Methodology

This study aims to explore how gender and authority are constructed through language in televised political interviews. To do this, it adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on two complementary frameworks, i.e. CDA and SFL. Together, these frameworks offer a way to uncover the deeper meanings behind the language used in high-stakes public interactions, particularly those involving politicians and journalists.

3.1. Research Design

The study is rooted in qualitative, interpretive analysis. Since language and power dynamics often rely on nuance, tone, and context, a purely quantitative approach would not suffice. Instead, the analysis focuses on how language is used in *situated discourse*, i.e. how political figures are questioned, how they respond, and how their gender may influence these interactions.

3.2. Data Selection

The data set consists of 16 televised political interviews, eight with male politicians and eight with female politicians, sourced from major English-language

news channels such as BBC, CNN, ABC, and Al Jazeera, spanning the years 2020 to 2024. The selection aimed for diversity in geography, political alignment, and interviewer gender. Only interviews where the politician held or had held a high-profile leadership role (e.g., Prime Minister, President, or Cabinet Minister) were included. Transcripts were either sourced from official broadcast archives or manually transcribed, ensuring accuracy and consistency.

3.3. Analytical Frameworks

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA provides the core lens through which these interviews were examined. As Fairclough (2013) and van Dijk (2015) have argued, discourse doesn't just reflect social realities, it helps shape them. Power relations, ideologies, and assumptions often surface not through what is explicitly said, but in the ways conversations are structured: who interrupts whom, how questions are framed, or which topics are emphasized. For this study, the CDA approach focused on:

- Turn-taking and interruptions
- Question types and framing strategies
- Lexical choices and modality (e.g., certainty, doubt)
- Pronoun use and speaker alignment

Particular attention was paid to how female politicians were positioned in contrast to their male counterparts, whether their authority was challenged, questioned, or reinforced by linguistic choices.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). While CDA helps uncover what is happening socially and ideologically, SFL, developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), helps explain how language functions to make those meanings. SFL views language as a social semiotic system: every word, phrase, and clause carries weight, revealing the speaker's relationships, intentions, and position. Three metafunctions of SFL were applied in the analysis:

- Ideational metafunction: How content is constructed (e.g., who does what to whom)
- Interpersonal metafunction: How relationships and authority are enacted (e.g., tone, modality)
- Textual metafunction: How the text is organized for emphasis and coherence
- By analyzing these elements, the study highlights how authority is linguistically enacted, or undermined, in real-time interviews.

3.4. Data Coding and Thematic Analysis

Each interview transcript was reviewed multiple times and coded using a combination of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and discourse feature tagging. Codes were created both inductively (emerging from the data) and deductively (informed by theory). For example, frequent interruptions of female politicians were initially noted as a recurring theme, which was then explored through both CDA (power asymmetries) and SFL (interruptions as challenges to speaker control). Themes that emerged across interviews included:

- Framing of expertise vs. emotion
- Control of conversational floor
- Legitimacy and competence markers
- Interruptions and speech repair

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All data were sourced from publicly available interviews. The study does not make evaluative claims about individual journalists or politicians but focuses on broader discursive patterns. Pseudonyms were not used since all sources were already in the public domain, and the focus is on discourse rather than personal identity.

4. Analysis

The interviews selected for this study were sourced from publicly available televised broadcasts between 2020 and 2024. They include prominent English-language programs such as *BBC's HardTalk*, *CNN's Amanpour*, *ABC's 7.30*, and *Al Jazeera's UpFront*. Sixteen interviews were chosen, eight featuring high-ranking male political figures and eight featuring female counterparts. These figures were either serving or had served in leadership positions, including Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, or presidential candidates. Interviews were selected to ensure a balance across political ideologies, regions, and interviewer genders. Each interview was transcribed manually to ensure fidelity to speech patterns, interruptions, fillers, and emphasis. Once transcribed, the data was examined through the lens of CDA and SFL to uncover how authority and gender were co-constructed in the heat of live media interviews.

4.1. Interruptions and Control of Speaking Time

One of the clearest patterns to emerge was how female politicians were more frequently interrupted by interviewers, both male and female. These interruptions were often not hostile but still served to subtly undermine speaker control.

Interview with Jacinda Ardern (ABC, 2021). In one exchange, Ardern was explaining New Zealand's COVID-19 strategy when the interviewer cut in mid-sentence:

Ardern: *"So what we've tried to do is balance the scientific data with—"*
Interviewer: *"But Prime Minister, isn't that just political rhetoric?"*

Here, the interruption didn't just break the flow—it reframed her explanation as mere "rhetoric", casting doubt on her authority. From an SFL perspective, this shifts the interpersonal metafunction, positioning the interviewer as the more powerful voice. From a CDA lens, the choice of the word "rhetoric" over "policy" or "strategy" is ideologically loaded, subtly diminishing her legitimacy.

Interview with Boris Johnson (BBC, 2020). In contrast, Johnson was allowed extended turns, even when he digressed. For instance,

Johnson: *"And if you look at the way the numbers are behaving, what we're seeing is a—what I call a natural ebb and flow, much like the tide, really. You see, when I was in—".*

Despite offering vague metaphors, the interviewer allowed Johnson to continue uninterrupted. The ideational metafunction here reveals loosely connected ideas, yet the absence of interruption legitimises his narrative.

4.2. Question Framing and Presuppositions

The questions posed to female politicians were often framed in ways that carried embedded assumptions about competence or likability.

Interview with Kamala Harris (CNN, 2023). *"Some critics say you're too cautious and calculating. How do you respond to that?"* This question presupposes a flaw and demands defence, a common tactic in interviews. But such phrasing was notably less frequent in male interviews, where questions leaned toward policy-based or strategic reflections**.**

Interview with Emmanuel Macron (France24, 2022). "How do you view France's role in shaping the European response to the energy crisis?" Here, Macron is positioned as a global actor rather than a figure being scrutinised for personality traits. The contrast illustrates how language can elevate or diminish authority, often unconsciously.

4.3. Emotional Framing vs. Strategic Framing

Female politicians were more often asked about emotions, while male politicians were asked about strategy or vision.

Interview with Sanna Marin (DW, 2022). "How did it feel, as a young woman, to be leading your country during a war on your doorstep?"

Contrast this with:

Interview with Joe Biden (CNN, 2022). "What strategic considerations shaped your decision to provide military aid to Ukraine?"

While both leaders dealt with similar contexts, the framing diverged. Marin is asked to provide an affective response, while Biden is asked to explain strategy. According to CDA, this emotional framing aligns with historical gendered assumptions—where women are often seen as emotional responders rather than calculated strategists (Lazar, 2005; van Dijk, 2015).

4.4. Modal Verbs and Epistemic Authority

A subtle but telling difference emerged in the use of modality, i.e. how certainty, doubt, or probability are expressed.

Female Politician (Angela Merkel). "We might see a rise in cases, and we should be prepared for various scenarios."

Male Politician (Scott Morrison). "We will see a rebound in the economy, and I know Australians will rise to the challenge."

Merkel's use of tentative modality reflects caution, perhaps culturally or personally motivated. Morrison's declarative tone, on the other hand, asserts certainty and leadership. Through SFL, we read this as a strategic use of the interpersonal metafunction, where language constructs confidence and authority. CDA helps us question whether such expressions are read differently depending on the speaker's gender.

4.5. Lexical Markers of Competence

Male politicians were more frequently described in interviews using words like "experienced," "decisive," or "firm". In contrast, female politicians were more often described as "inspiring," "relatable," or "determined". While these aren't negative traits, they do reflect different expectations around gender and leadership.

Interview Descriptions on YouTube Thumbnails. "Joe Biden: A steady hand in crisis"

"Jacinda Ardern: A compassionate leader in tough times"

The use of adjectives shows how leadership is gendered even before the interview begins. These patterns do not suggest a conspiracy, but they do reveal how unconscious linguistic habits can reinforce who is seen as "naturally" in charge. The analysis demonstrates how even mundane elements, interruptions, question phrasing, modal verbs, play a role in performing or challenging authority, depending on the speaker's gender.

By applying CDA and SFL, this study peels back the layers of political talk in the media. It shows how power isn't just exercised through policy, but also through conversation. In doing so, it offers a timely reminder that our everyday language choices matter more than we think.

5. Conclusion

As this study draws to a close, one thing becomes unmistakably clear: language is never neutral. The words we choose, the way we ask questions, when we interrupt, or allow space to speak, all of these carry weight. And in the world of televised political interviews, they play a subtle but significant role in shaping who gets to sound like a leader.

By closely examining a range of interviews with male and female politicians, this research found consistent patterns in how gender and authority are constructed, and often, unequally distributed, through language. Female leaders, while articulate, accomplished, and confident, were more frequently interrupted, asked emotionally framed questions, or subjected to language that called their competence into question. Male leaders, by contrast, were more often allowed to speak without interruption and were framed as strategic, decisive, and in command. The findings are aligned with the study of Andrich (2023) and Rohrbach et al., (2022).

6. Key Findings

- **Interruptions were gendered**: Women were interrupted more frequently, even when speaking with authority on matters within their expertise.
- **Question framing differed**: Female politicians were more likely to be asked personal or emotional questions, while male politicians received questions about policy and strategy.
- **Linguistic features reflected and reinforced power**: Modal verbs, lexical choices, and tone all played a role in positioning men as more authoritative, even when female speakers demonstrated equal or greater clarity and insight.
- **Authority was subtly gendered** in how interviews were introduced, conducted, and concluded.

These findings are not meant to point fingers at individual journalists or news organisations. In fact, many of these patterns seem to emerge not from conscious bias, but from deeply embedded cultural expectations—expectations about what a leader should "sound" like, and who gets to occupy that space without being challenged.

7. Implications

So what does this mean moving forward? First, for journalists and media professionals, it's a call to reflect more critically on the language and structure of interviews. Awareness is the first step toward change. Being conscious of how a question is framed, who is interrupted, and how authority is constructed can help create a more equitable media landscape.

For linguists and researchers, this study reinforces the power of tools like SFL and CDA in uncovering the ideologies embedded in everyday language. These frameworks help us see what might otherwise go unnoticed. For educators and students, especially in the fields of media, gender studies, and linguistics, this

work offers a practical example of how theory and real-world data can come together to reveal meaningful social patterns. And perhaps most importantly, for the general public, this research offers a lens to become more informed consumers of media. When we pay attention not just to *what* is said, but *how* it is said, and to *whom*, we begin to understand the quiet, ongoing work language does in shaping public perceptions of leadership and credibility.

Interviews may seem ordinary, just another part of the 24-hour news cycle. But as this study has shown, even in these seemingly casual conversations, power is being negotiated, sometimes reinforced, sometimes challenged, but always present. If we want a world where leadership isn't judged through the lens of gender, then we must begin by paying closer attention to the words we use, the questions we ask, and the voices we elevate. Language, after all, doesn't just reflect reality, it helps create it.

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