

Masculine and Feminine Language: A Conceptual Paper on Theoretical Triangulation

Zuhairi, Q. Z., *Raslee, N. N

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines the theoretical triangulation of the Dominance Model, Genderlect Theory, and Deficit Theory to provide a more nuanced perspective on masculine and feminine language. By categorising these theories based on their associated linguistic features, the analysis interprets how gender, power relations, and communicative aims shape language use in ways that evoke strong audience responses. While masculine language is often characterised by directness and authority, and feminine language by empathy and indirectness, this paper proposes that relying on a single-framework analysis limits understanding. Instead, the paper seeks to demonstrate the application of theoretical triangulation in promoting more reliable, valid, and nuanced interpretations of gendered communication. Furthermore, this approach reveals how these frameworks can offer both complementary and competing explanations, thereby transcending traditional reductionist labelling in linguistic research.

Keywords: theoretical triangulation, masculine language, feminine language

INTRODUCTION

There are two crucial concepts when conducting research, which are reliability and validity. Reliability indicates the consistency and dependability of the data collection process. Ensuring reliability in research means that the same study with the same results can be replicated using the same measurement. For example, if an instrument such as a thermometer was used to measure the temperature of a body of water. A reliable measurement would produce the same reading each time. This would indicate the method and measurement technique are reliable. Comparatively, validity refers to the accuracy and meaningfulness of the data. A technique or method is considered valid if the results that they produced aligned with reality. In essence, while reliability assures you that your data collection process is consistent in producing the same results, validity ensures that these results are not only consistent but also relevant and accurate in what it intends to measure.

Researchers use triangulation to seek reliable and consistent research findings. By triangulating, researchers can reduce biases, enhance the depth of their research, and achieve trustworthiness in their study. The primary aim of this paper is to discuss the theoretical perspectives of the Dominance Model (Coates, 1993, see Table 2), Genderlect Theory (Tannen, 1990, see Table 3), and Deficit Theory (Lakoff, 1975, see Table 1) in relation to masculine and feminine language. Furthermore, the paper seeks to demonstrate how a triangulated approach can reveal both complementary and competing aspects of how language use is shaped by gender, power relations, and communicative aims.

There are four main types of triangulations, including data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and methodological (or methods) triangulation. These four categories are widely used as an organising framework in methodological discussions (Hussein, 2009; Abdalla et al., 2018; Tzagkarakis & Kritas, 2023; Vivek et al., 2023; Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

Data triangulation involves collecting information from different sources, settings, or times to test whether findings hold across different contexts (Hussein, 2009; Noble & Smith, 2015; Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

Researchers may conduct similar investigations on different samples and populations, at various sites, or through repeated measures at different times. Hussein (2009) explicitly states that time, space and population are subtypes of data triangulation that can contribute to data robustness. Secondly, investigator or researcher triangulation entails the involvement of multiple researchers during the phases of data collection and analysis to mitigate individual bias and enhance analytical credibility (Abdalla et al., 2018; Vivek et al., 2023; Kisely & Kendall, 2011). Investigator triangulation can reveal different viewpoints and mitigate researcher biases that may occur.

The next type of triangulation is theoretical triangulation, which is the application of more than one theoretical perspective or set of hypotheses to interpret the same data. The final type of triangulation is methodological triangulation, which is the approach of using multiple methods to study the same phenomenon. Methodological triangulation is subdivided into within-methods and between-methods (Hussein, 2009; Vivek et al., 2023; Tzagkarakis & Kritas, 2023). The within-methods approach to methodological triangulation is the application of different techniques within the same paradigm, for example, two qualitative techniques in a study. Comparatively, the between-methods approach to methodological triangulation is the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, or mixed methods. Hussein (2009) noted that when a researcher employs the approach of having more than one paradigm in their study, they should adopt complementary techniques. In other words, the dominant paradigm should guide the overall research design and data interpretation, while the complementary methods serve to enrich and confirm the research findings (Hussein, 2009; Vivek et al., 2023).

In terms of reliability and validity, triangulation can enhance increased credibility through convergent validation and richer data (Fielding, 2012; Tzagkarakis & Kritas, 2023). Hence, triangulation leads to more reliable and trustworthy findings due to the variations in explanations and viewpoints. In the context of this paper, theoretical triangulation also broadens theoretical inference (Abdalla et al., 2018; Vivek et al., 2023).

Theoretical Triangulation

Theoretical triangulation refers to the purposive application of two or more theoretical perspectives in an academic investigation to interpret a phenomenon which has similar empirical perspectives. The purpose of triangulation is to strengthen the research justification and reveal complementary or competing discourse (Murray, 1999). This practice helps improve or update theories in social science, as it encourages researchers to combine different theoretical ideas, which can result in deeper understanding and new ways to look at complicated social issues. In practice, theoretical triangulation is implemented by explicitly selecting and applying distinct theoretical frameworks to the same empirical material (such as interviews, survey results, and archival records). The results or data obtained from these methods are then compared, contrasted and synthesised to generate more robust inferences or new theoretical propositions (Vivek et al., 2023; Kelle et al., 2019).

In contexts where tensions or disparities occur between and within concepts in the theories, researchers carry out systematic comparisons. Conceptual tensions are treated as an analytic resource, not to simply choose one winner amongst the theories but to explicate boundary conditions or complementary concepts. Conceptual tensions that may occur in theoretical triangulation may even highlight the need for theoretical synthesis (Vivek et al., 2023).

Masculine and Feminine Language

Masculine language refers to how men traditionally express their feelings, shaped by cultural expectations. Compared to feminine language, it often leans towards a lack of emotion, describing qualities that are assertive, authoritative, strong, and emotionally distant (Tomko & Andriichenko, 2021). The term 'masculine' brings to mind a specific set of traits, qualities, and roles that are generally deemed to belong to men, like dominion, control, protectiveness, and logic.

Feminine language refers to the ways women use language to express feelings; through expressions such as gentler examples, epithets, metaphors, and intensifiers, women draw from a more elaborate and sophisticated

arsenal as compared to men (Tomko & Andriichenko, 2021). This type of expression displays an attitude of sympathy, gentleness, and emotional attentiveness, which is often associated with a nurturing, polite social demeanour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is grounded on three theoretical frameworks that explore gender and language, which are Jennifer Coates's Dominance Model (1993), Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Theory (1990), and Robin Lakoff's Deficit Theory (1975). These theories help form a structure for the identification and categorisation of masculine and feminine language.

The Deficit Theory by Lakoff (1975) reiterates the characteristics of feminine utterances. According to Lakoff (1975), the language used by women contains elements such as hedges, tag questions, effectors of politeness, and emotionally coloured adjectives. These linguistic features relate to emotional sensitivity and tenderness, caution or softness. Lakoff (1975) argues that women's speech reflects social inequality and is marked by distinct linguistic features such as hedges, tag questions, politeness, and emotionally charged adjectives. These features are thought to indicate a lack of social power and an increased emotional sensitivity. According to the Deficit Theory, feminine language often appears weaker or less authoritative than masculine language. Lakoff (1975) identified linguistic elements that contribute to the perception of women's speech as uncertain and insecure, such as intensifiers, hedges, and tag questions. This theory suggests that women are expected by society to be indirect and polite, and this expectation is reflected in the language they use (Lakoff, 1975). Hence, a brief look at the Deficit Theory inspired further research into how language reflects and reinforces gender roles.

Coates's (1993) Dominance Model examines the use of gendered language that signifies power and control in social interactions. Coates (1993) posits that women are predisposed to cooperative and emotionally nuanced communication, whereas men typically dominate discussions through competitiveness, aggression, and more occurrences of interruptions. The theory emphasised men's linguistic traits and how they frequently used language techniques to establish dominance and assert control in conversations. Coates (1993) found that women were generally more cooperative and accommodating, whereas men were more likely to interrupt, exert control, and monopolise conversations. The Dominance Model (Coates, 1993) provides a comprehensive analysis of the features of masculine language.

According to the Genderlect Theory (Tannen, 1990), gender differences in communication can be better understood by considering them as discrete "genderlects", or distinctive linguistic patterns that are specific to each gender. Men and women frequently speak differently, which reflects their cultural upbringing and socialisation. Tannen (1990) asserts that men typically communicate in a "report" style, emphasising information sharing and demonstrating their expertise. Women, on the other hand, frequently adopt a "rapport" style, emphasising empathy, social connections, and establishing rapport through dialogue.

Discussions on gender identities in recent studies

In recent studies, performative enactment of gender both shapes and is shaped by talk-in-interaction across domains (for example, in Figure 1, workplaces, education, sports, and entrepreneurship). Previous research indicates that gender norms are enacted, challenged, and occasionally dismantled through repetition and social practices (Galmangodage et al., 2025; Høglund & Rørbech, 2021; Humonen & Whittle, 2023; Kelan, 2010; Orner et al., 2024; Ravel & Rail, 2007; Watson et al., 2023).

Recent research emphasises that gender and sexuality are not fixed traits, but rather performative, socially constructed practices shaped by everyday discourse. Studies across diverse environments illustrated how organisational and social interactions actively "do" and "undo" gender norms. For instance, Kelan (2010) demonstrated how institutional discourse among information technology workers both reinforces and destabilises gender binaries. Similarly, Ravel and Rail (2007) applied a feminist poststructuralist lens to

women's sports in Quebec, revealing how language within sports discourse constructs queer and lesbian identities while simultaneously challenging heteronormativity. Empirical studies (Bodó et al., 2019; McDowell, 2015) of masculinities in settings such as university dormitories and professional environments identified patterns consistent with dominance. Such patterns include interruptions, topic management, and affiliative and antagonistic strategies. These studies provide empirical support on how gender dominance is performed through discursive practices.

Language and power also result in an intricate relationship. Humonen and Whittle (2023) employed Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 2015) to examine how context-specific workplace conversations, like walkie-talkie exchanges, shape gendered power differentials and linguistic injury (the belief that slurs or demeaning discourse can cause psychological and social damage). Even in highly regulated environments, such as a Finnish restaurant where sexual humour is proscribed, Humonen and Whittle (2023) found that talk-in-interaction serves as a framework for producing and receiving gendered social meanings. In sports, Ravel and Rail (2007) reported that language was an active tool for enacting power and resisting marginalisation. Additionally, language was used as a discursive tool that determined who belongs and how identities are validated.

Discursive power struggles are observable in classrooms and literature discussions. Høglund and Rørbech (2021) pointed out that classrooms serve as intersectional spaces where race, class, and gender overlap. Educational discourse such as negotiation and turn-taking is heavily regulated by power structures when these axes overlap. In return, these power structures determine whose contributions are considered valuable and who has the right to speak. In their study, Orner et al. (2024) investigated dialogic discussions in reading classrooms through a micro-ethnographic lens. They discovered that topics such as LGBTQ+ topics and non-normative gender identities would reproduce the same paradigms of dominance regarding topic control between teachers and students. Orner et al. (2024) found that when classrooms move beyond simplistic binary assumptions, they naturally begin to practice Tannen's Difference lens, which focuses on cross-gender communication and the collaborative negotiation of meaning.

Critiques (Gligorić, 2019; Kaiser, 2016; Ray, 2019) questioned the universality and empirical validity of the notion that patterns often observed in traditional discourse among men and women communicate using two distinct, culturally defined languages. Researchers recommend triangulating with corpus-based, ethnographic, or narrative methods to avoid overgeneralisation (Kaiser, 2016; Ray, 2019; Sahid et al., 2018). Some scholars called for de-gendering certain claims about linguistic styles or for reframing gendered differences as patterns contingent on social roles and environments rather than fixed gender categories alone (Kaiser, 2016; Ray, 2019).

Perspectives on Gendered Communication

Historically, the study of gender and language is anchored by three foundational frameworks: Deficit, Dominance, and Genderlect Theory. The theories represent linguistic differences through these lenses: 1) as a manifestation of inherent subordination, 2) as a tool for enforcing systemic power, and 3) as a product of distinct cultural socialisation. While these theories provide a baseline for examining conversational dynamics, some researchers argue that their strict categorisation of genders might oversimplify the contextual and fluid nature of human communication (Kaiser, 2016; Sahid et al., 2018; Gligorić, 2019; Ray, 2019).

The Deficit Theory and the Dominance Model both view gender through a hierarchical paradigm that positions feminine speech opposite a masculine standard. The Deficit Theory characterised feminine language as subordinate. However, recent scholarship has reframed these features as descriptive markers of societal inequality rather than inherent female inadequacy (Kaiser, 2016; Ray, 2019). Hence, a speaker using feminine language may instead be exercising power through social intelligence, not just showing weakness.

Comparatively, Coates's Dominance Model builds upon this view of 'inherent female inadequacy' by focusing on male behaviour, arguing that men actively utilise interruptions and topic control to enforce social hierarchies in mixed-gender interactions. Upon consideration, from the view power dynamics, both models can be overly simplistic and deterministic by reducing complex social interactions to mere symptoms of patriarchal

oppression.

In an attempt to move away from these hierarchical constraints, Tannen's Genderlect Theory reframed gender differences as a form of neutral, cross-cultural communication. By positing that men engage in "report talk" to maintain status while women use "rapport talk" to build relationships, Tannen removed the stigma of deficit. This framework introduces a different limitation, which is essentialism. It provides the premise that men and women operate within two universally distinct 'genderlects', creating a gap that ignores how linguistic strategies overlap across genders. Recent research has challenged the theory's generalisations; Waterman (2015) and Żmigrodzki (2021) argued that linguistic variation is far more complex, with individuals frequently crossing these theoretical boundaries.

Justifying Theoretical Triangulation in Gendered Language Analysis

"The methodological contribution of this paper is in the integration of the three theories. Traditional approaches may apply the theories through a single, separate lens, but the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) operationalises them as a unified analytical matrix. Such synthesis transforms raw linguistic data into a multi-layered discourse analysis (Denzin, 1978). Thus, demonstrating that the value of theoretical triangulation is found in the synthesis of competing perspectives, rather than the sum of its parts.

Individuals often shift their linguistic strategies depending on the setting, audience, and immediate communicative goals. Therefore, a conceptual framework matrix (such as in Figure 1) that includes the Dominance, Genderlect, and Deficit theories acknowledges that linguistic features can serve multiple structural functions simultaneously (Suwastini et al., 2023). In a conversation, a speaker may use a tag question as a deferential marker of social inequality (deficit), a collaborative tool for rapport-building (difference), or a strategic mechanism to navigate systemic power dynamics (dominance). Theoretical triangulation can map these shifts and capture how speakers negotiate identity and authority across contexts.

There are several operationalised suggestions for the application of theoretical triangulation in studies. A study may use transcripts from an academic departmental meeting that includes communication (such as requests or proposals) between a junior faculty member, perhaps proposing a curriculum change. The transcripts of the meeting when analysed through a single-lens analysis may produce the following. Based on the Deficit Theory: the analysis might include the speaker's frequent use of hedges, such as "I think" or "perhaps", interpreting these linguistic markers as indicators of professional insecurity or a lack of authoritative standing. Through the lens of the Dominance Model, interruptions by a senior faculty member is viewed as an exertion of power, which might be a deliberate act to reinforce hierarchical control and marginalise the junior speaker's input. Via the Genderlect Theory, the interaction analyses the cross-cultural communication and, consequently, places the junior member's 'rapport' style as an attempt to foster consensus, while the senior member utilises a 'report' style as a tool to maintain status and control.

By applying theoretical triangulation, the data is synthesised to achieve a more holistic interpretation. Viewed through the three theoretical lenses, the integrated approach demonstrates that linguistic features are polysemous. This means that simultaneously, language can signal social placement, power dynamics, and cultural alignment. By viewing the data beyond the traditional reductionist view, it can be identified that the junior faculty member's use of hedging was a strategic tool to lessen resistance, while the senior faculty member's interruption may both be seen as an act to display dominance and a failure to interpret the collaborative intent behind the junior member's communicative style. This synthesis combines the disparate findings to reveal a more complex power structure in communication.

Another illustration of the operationalised theoretical case study may be a similar context of a team member suggesting a major or drastic change to the workflow. In his/her spoken proposal, the pronouns "we" and "us" were used. From the view of the Deficit Theory, substantial use of tag questions is seen as a sign of uncertainty and lack of conviction in the proposed strategy ("This should work, right?"). Through the lens of the Dominance Model, the manager's silent pondering can be perceived as withholding feedback, which is a subtle power move to assert authority. In return, this forces the team member to seek approval by using more tag questions, perhaps. Genderlect Theory may view this attempt (the use of the pronouns "we" and "us") to share

suggestions as a "rapport" strategy, which portrays the team member's effort to achieve team harmony and build social connection over individual credit. Synthesis of the findings on the three frameworks may illustrate that the speaker is not demonstrating insecurity (Deficit) but is employing a relational power strategy. By using inclusive language (we, us) and tag questions, the speaker is actively negotiating the team's power structure. Thus, inviting the manager to provide input to encourage participation. In contrast, the manager's silence may not merely be dominance but a measured "rapport" gap to self-regulate.

Triangulation can perform as internal check-and-balance system that enhances the validity and interpretive trustworthiness of the findings (Lee et al., 2019). For instance, Lakoff (1975) categorized the use of intensifiers and hedges as indicators of social insecurity, whereas Tannen (1990) reframed the same elements as intentional strategies to build intimacy and rapport. Consequently, when analysing a corpus of language, researchers should focus on the contextual reception of the speech rather than declaring one theory universally correct. If a speaker uses a tag question and the recipient consequently questions their expertise, the Deficit lens is validated. Conversely, if that same tag question successfully boosts audience engagement and group cohesion, the Genderlect lens provides a more convincing explanation. By relying on contextual outcomes rather than rigid definitions, theoretical triangulation effectively prevents reductionist labelling.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper argues that the value of theoretical triangulation does not lie in validating these theories as universally applicable across gendered interactions. Rather, the value lies in their capacity to provide a multifaceted lens for analysis. Critics have contended the essentialist tendencies and empirical universality of the Deficit, Dominance, and Genderlect frameworks. Thus, by advancing beyond universal linguistic rules, the triangulated approach encourages researchers to treat these theories as diagnostic tools. Therefore, shifting the objective toward understanding how specific social roles, power dynamics, and communicative environments shape language, in contrast to applying one theory as the only interpretation for gendered discourse.

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APPENDICES

Table 1. The Deficit Theory (Lakoff, 1975)

No.	Characteristics of Feminine Language	Explanation	Example
1	Lexical Hedges	These phrases can express both certainty and uncertainty about the topic, and they can also soften the impact of what is said.	"I think this might work." "Maybe we should try something different."
2	Tag Question	An outright statement and a yes-no question A tag question is a question followed by a statement or declarative sentence, and some of them are used because of someone's uncertainty about the statement that he or she said. Tag questions are used more by women than men and can be seen as a way for women to project an image of themselves as being polite, uncertain, and non-threatening.	"The weather is nice today, isn't it?" / "You'll help me with this, won't you?"
3.	Rising Intonation on Declarative	The special use of a syntactic rule is a widespread difference that is perceptible in feminine language patterns. The intonation in declarative sentences typically remains flat, but it can rise at the end, making the sentence sound like a question.	"You're coming to the party?" (with rising intonation at the end)
4	Adjectives	The word only concerns emotional reactions rather than specific information. There are several adjectives that can be used for both male and female or neutral. However, women tend to use these adjectives more frequently.	"This dress is absolutely lovely." / "The movie was so adorable."
5	Precise Colour Terms	Women give colour details far more precisely when naming colours than men do.	"This is turquoise, not blue." / "That's more of a peach than orange."
6	Intensifiers	Words that reinforce a statement help ensure listeners are confident in the speaker.	"I'm so happy for you!" / "This is really important."
7	Hypercorrect Grammar	It involves avoidance of terms considered vulgar or coarse, such as 'ain't', and the use of precise pronunciation, such as sounding the final 'g' in words such as 'going' instead of the more casual 'goin' or double negatives.	"I am not going to do that" (instead of "I ain't gonna do that").
8	Super Polite Forms	In the same sense, a request may be viewed as a very polite order that does not require open obedience but suggests an action to assist or show sympathy for the speaker.	"Would you mind opening the window?" / "Could you please pass the salt?"
9	Avoidance of Strong Swear Words	Women use 'oh dear' more often than 'shit'. Women tend to avoid violent curses. Men and women have different preferences for using swear words. Men often use rude and forbidden invective words like 'damn', 'bloody hell', and 'shit', often found in male	"Oh dear!" (instead of "Oh shit!") / "Goodness me!" (instead of "Damn!")

		language, while women use more polite versions.	
10	Emphatic Stress	Women use a strict emphasis on increasing their intonation. This shows that women use emphasis because they anticipate not being taken seriously by the other person.	"I really need you to listen to me." / "That was so amazing!"

Table 2. The Dominance Model (Coates, 1993)

No.	Characteristics of Masculine Language	Explanation	Example
1	Minimal responses	Men tend to use these terms to assert dominance. This is also known as a backchannel.	mhm, yeah, and right.
2	Commands and directives	Men tend to use explicit commands, especially when they are in the same-sex groups.	Close the door.
3	Swearing and taboo language	Men use more swearing than women. Men's conversations used substantially more swear words than women's conversations, while mixed conversations tend to accommodate both sides.	damn, shit.
4	Compliments	Men tend to compliment each other based on skill and possessions.	it's cool, good boy, good job
5	Theme	Men, or men in the same-sex group conversation, sometimes talk about current affairs, travel and sports.	Did you catch the highlights of the match last night? The new transit line cuts commute times down by twenty minutes.
6	Question	Men ask questions to gain information; it has a different pattern from women, who sometimes use question tags to ask questions.	What time does the meeting start? How many units are left in the storage room?

Table 3. The Genderlect Theory (Tannen, 1990)

No.	Conversational Style	Example
1	Connection vs Status Women seek connection; men seek status.	Connection: We're all in this together, let's figure it out. Status: <i>I've managed this specific type of project twice before.</i>
2	Independence vs Intimacy Men "go do it alone", while women seek help	Independence: <i>I'll just look up the instructions and fix it myself.</i> Intimacy: <i>Can we look over this together? I want to make sure we're on the same page.</i>
3	Advice vs Understanding Men see issues as a mission to solve, while women see it as a means of empathy	Advice: <i>You should just email HR and ask for a desk reassignment.</i> Understanding: <i>That sounds incredibly frustrating, I completely see why you're upset.</i>
4	Information vs Feeling	Information: <i>The flight takes four hours and leaves at noon.</i>

	Men share information; women share feelings	Feeling: <i>I'm really looking forward to the trip, but a bit anxious about the packing.</i>
5	Orders vs Proposals Women make suggestions; men use direct imperatives.	Orders: <i>Put the groceries on the counter.</i> Proposals: <i>How about we unpack the groceries first, and then start dinner?</i>
6	Conflict vs Compromise Men will argue; women will try to find a middle ground	Conflict: <i>That logic doesn't make sense; my strategy is much faster.</i> Compromise: <i>I see your point about speed, so let's combine your first step with my second step.</i>

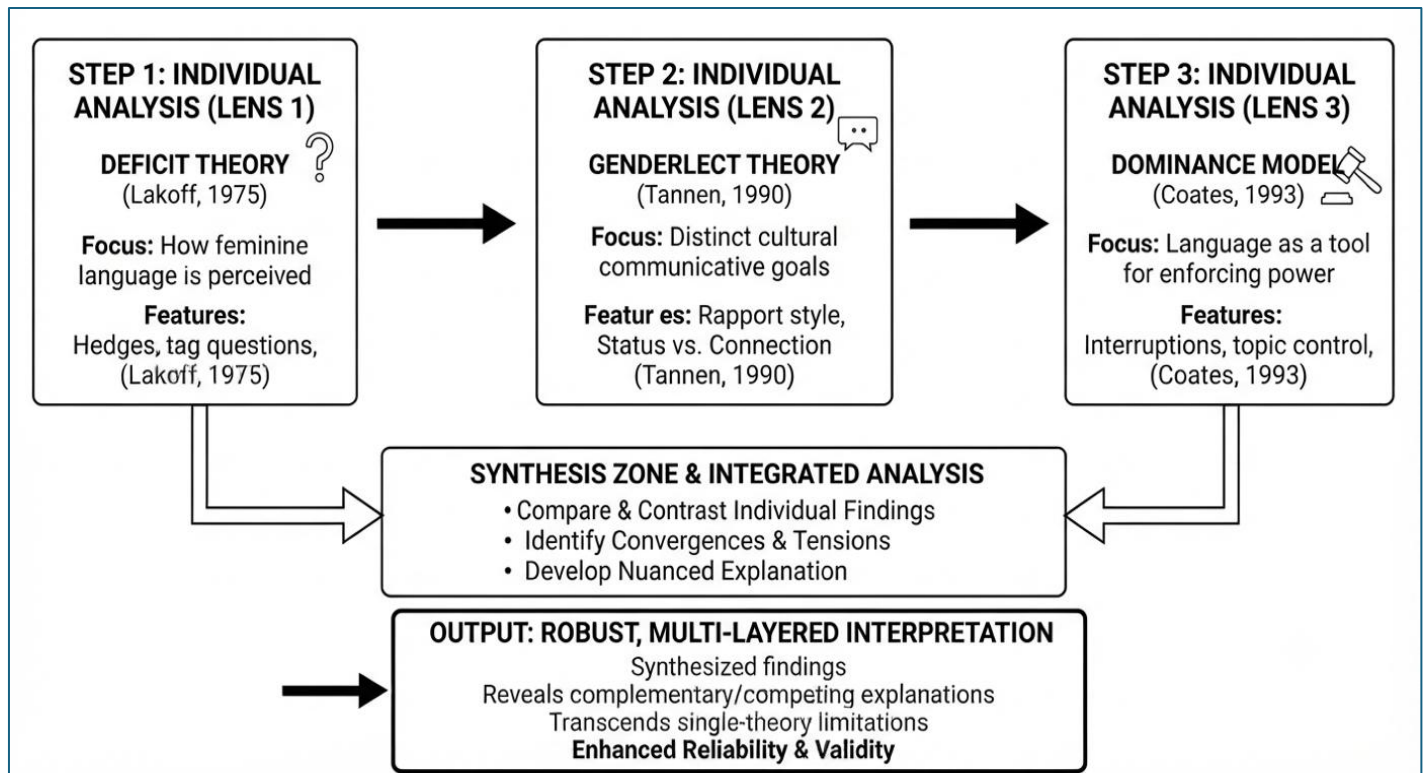


Figure 1 . Conceptual Framework: Theoretical Triangulation of Gendered Language