

On Male-Female Linguistic Differences in *Madame Doubtfire*

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1. Preface

It has been said that men and women speak in a different way. Therefore, there are some linguistic features – words, phrases, and so on – which are stereotypically associated with men or women. As a result, from adults or their environment, children learn to associate more and more of such linguistic features with one gender. According to Edelsky (1977), children of a certain age tend to make an ‘overgeneralization’ that some words and expressions are restricted to one gender. That is, in her survey she showed that 12-year-old children exhibited a higher level of consensus than adults in assigning linguistic items to either men or women. Her study has been considered very interesting, and 12 linguistic items or structures which she chose for her study are still considered either masculine or feminine. Therefore in this paper, I will try to discover whether or not there is a connection between this ‘overgeneralization’ and graded readers; in other words, I will try to see if graded readers get children to associate some linguistic features with men or women. This paper uses two *Madame Doubtfire* texts¹⁾ as its data. One was published by Puffin Books, and the other by Penguin Readers – one of the most famous graded readers. It was made into a film whose title was *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Japanese title *Mrs. Doubt*). In this film²⁾ Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Hilliard got divorced, and Miranda, the wife, got custody of their three children – Lydia, Christopher, and Natalie. In desperation, Daniel decided to disguise himself as a woman and come to his ex-wife’s house as a housekeeper named ‘Madame Doubtfire’ just to meet his children. This film has become famous for Daniel’s feminine way of speaking, and this is the reason why I have chosen this novel.

This paper argues that graded readers do get children to associate linguistic features with men or women. The original text clearly shows male-female differences in language use, and

graded readers retain the characteristics of the original texts.

2. Graded readers

Hill (1997) defines graded readers as follows.

- (1) Graded readers are extended texts, mostly fiction, written in language reduced in terms of structures and vocabulary. They were initially simplified versions of classics, modern novels, and fairy tales (simplifications), but since the 1960s an increasing proportion have been written specially for a series (simple originals).

(Hill 1997 : 57)

In other words, graded readers are reading materials which are written by restricting vocabulary and complicated sentence structures. Oxford Bookworms Library, Cambridge English Readers, and Penguin Readers are among the most famous graded readers. Hill (2001) says that graded readers are not only books just to enjoy reading, but also good materials to learn a language.

- (2) They help *language learning* by providing a context for language that enhances and extends the learner's grasp of the lexis and syntax.

(Hill 2001 : 302)

Therefore there is a possibility that graded readers have an influence on children's language acquisition process. Thus I will pick out *Madame Doubtfire*, which was rewritten³⁾ as a level 3 book of Penguin Readers, and compare it with the original text to see male-female differences in language use.

3. Overgeneralization

Based on the research by Lakoff (1975), Edelsky (1977) picked out 12 items which could be considered rather masculine or feminine. She asked 122 adults (52 men and 70 women) and 122 children (64 boys and 58 girls) to guess which expression is masculine or feminine.

The children were either first graders, third graders or sixth graders. As a result, six-grade children gave correct answers more than any other grader, and interestingly, fewer adults answered correctly. These findings¹¹ suggest that at one time during their growth process, children are likely to make an 'overgeneralization' that some expressions are restricted to one gender. This research has been supported by a lot of linguists including Poynton (1989).

From Hill's remark quoted in (2), we can presume that graded readers have something to do with this 'overgeneralization'. Thus in the next section, I will document how masculine or feminine expressions are used in the original text as well as the graded readers edition of *Madame Doubtfire*. In this paper, I first argue that the graded readers edition does not emphasize male-female differences. However, it retains the features of the original text, and thus we can see a lot of gender differences in both texts. Therefore we can conclude that graded readers indeed have some connection with children's 'overgeneralization'.

4. The data analysis of *Madame Doubtfire*

In this section, I will document how masculine or feminine expressions are used in two texts of *Madame Doubtfire*. Using WordSmith Tools, I checked 12 linguistic items that Edelsky (1977) picked out for her survey. But I could not find any examples of 'adorable', 'damn it', 'damn+adjective', 'I'll be damned', 'oh dear', 'my goodness' and 'won't you please'. Therefore I will only document how 5 items – 'so', 'very', 'just', tag questions, and commands – are used. For each item, I will cite examples⁵¹ from both texts, and show tables indicating how many examples are found in each text and who uses such examples.

4.1 So

Firstly, I searched 'so'. When this word is used to mean 'very', like the following examples, it is considered a feminine word. Therefore, before I calculated the number of 'so', I excluded examples whose meaning is not equal to 'very'.

(3) a. 'Please,' Daniel begged her. 'Stay for a quick cup of tea. You look so white. I don't like to think of you driving back just yet.' (p. 174)

b. 'Please,' said Daniel, 'stay for a cup of tea. You look so white and tired.' He showed

Miranda into the kitchen, now shining like new. (p. 36)

- (4) a. 'Oh, do stop being so silly!' Lydia scolded her father impatiently. (p. 7)
 b. 'Oh, please stop being so stupid, Dad,' said Lydia, still annoyed. (p. 4)

Table 1 Puffin Books

	Male		Female	
So	Daniel	5 (17%)	Doubtfire	2 (6%)
	Christopher	5 (17%)	Miranda	11 (37%)
			Lydia	7 (23%)
	Total	10 (34%)	Total	20 (66%)

Table 2 Penguin Readers Level 3

	Male		Female	
So	Daniel	3 (18%)	Doubtfire	1 (6%)
	Christopher	2 (12%)	Miranda	6 (35%)
			Lydia	5 (29%)
	Total	5 (30%)	Total	12 (70%)

From these tables, we can see that in both texts women use 'so' more often than men. There are more female characters than male characters, but even if we look at individual characters, Miranda uses 'so' more often than her ex-husband Daniel and Lydia uses it more often than her younger brother Christopher. However, with regard to Daniel, he does not try to use 'so' more often when he is disguised as Madame Doubtfire. He uses it more often when he is Daniel.

4.2 Very

Next, I searched 'very', which is also considered feminine by Edelsky (1977) as well as Lakoff (1975).

- (5) a. Daniel drew himself up. 'You don't need to tell *me*,' he reminded her. 'I am a single parent, too. And whereas she has you three to keep her company for most of the week, I don't. And you are forty minutes late, as usual. That's forty minutes off my time with you, my very limited time with you. Forty minutes shaved off yet again by her customary unpunctuality and lack of consideration for my feelings.' (pp. 6-7)
 b. 'You don't need to tell *me* that,' said Daniel. 'I'm a single parent too. Your mother has the three of you with her for most of the week but *I* don't. Now I've lost forty

minutes of the very short time I have with you, just because she can't be here on time and doesn't worry about my feelings.' (p. 2)

- (6) a. 'Separated, are you, dear? You and your husband?' 'Divorced.' 'Oh, I'm sorry. Marriage can be a great blessing.' 'Divorce can be even more of one,' answered Miranda. Madame Doubtfire looked shocked. In order to defend herself, Miranda added: 'My husband was a very difficult man.' (p. 60)
- b. 'You don't live with your husband, dear?' asked Madame Doubtfire. 'No, we're divorced, I'm glad to say. He's a very difficult man.' (p. 15)

Table 3 Puffin Books

	Male		Female	
Very	Daniel	9 (19%)	Doubtfire	16 (33%)
	Newsagent	1 (2%)	Miranda	9 (19%)
			Lydia	11 (23%)
			Natalie	2 (4%)
	Total	10 (21%)	Total	38 (79%)

Table 4 Penguin Readers Level 3

	Male		Female	
Very	Daniel	1 (14%)	Doubtfire	2 (29%)
			Miranda	2 (29%)
			Lydia	2 (29%)
	Total	1 (14%)	Total	6 (86%)

From these tables, women use 'very' more often than men in both texts. As for Daniel, he uses 'very' more frequently when he is disguised as Madame Doubtfire. Looking at the children, Lydia often uses 'very', but Christopher never uses it in either text. From this result, it can be said that compared with 'so', 'very' is a very feminine word.

4.3 Just

Thirdly, I searched how 'just' ⁶¹ is used. 'Just' is also regarded as a feminine word.

- (7) a. Daniel tried to explain. 'It's just that some things are *important*. People are prepared to suffer for them. Some feel that way about the things they do. "Better to be a

- discontented poet,” said one of the great philosophers, “than a contented pig.” (p. 120)
- b. ‘It’s just that some things are important,’ answered Daniel. ‘A famous man once said, “It’s better to be an unhappy thinker than a happy pig.”’ (p. 28)
- (8) a. ‘Daddy can’t,’ mourned Natalie, and then, reminded: ‘He’ll have to try to keep my pink tie clean when he wears it.’ She sighed. ‘*If* he wears it’ Madame Doubtfire assured her confidently: ‘If you knit your father a pink tie for his birthday, he’ll wear it, I’m quite sure.’ [...] ‘I tried to phone him.’ ‘Did you, dear? Why?’ ‘To ask him if he liked pink.’ ‘When, dear?’ ‘Just now. While you were in the bathroom. But he was out.’ She picked absent-mindedly at the fringe of the counterpane. ‘He’s out a lot now. He always used to be in when I phoned him.’ ‘Natalie –’ ‘What?’ ‘It doesn’t matter. Never mind.’ But it did matter, and he [= Daniel] could tell that she did mind. He minded, too – so much so that when Miranda finally returned home very late from work that evening, and dumped a huge box of substandard light fittings down on the kitchen table in a vile mood, he was still far, far too keyed-up to have the sense to postpone his fictitious report of a telephone message. ‘Dear, just before I take off – their father rang’ Lydia and Christopher, he noticed, only pricked up their ears with amusement and interest; but Natalie looked absolutely delighted. Miranda screwed her face up into an exhausted grimace. ‘Oh, God. Just what I need!’ ‘Dear?’ ‘Never mind. When did he ring? Don’t tell me. Lunchtime.’ Madame Doubtfire was puzzled. (pp. 77-78)
- b. When Miranda got home, she was very tired. ‘Just before I go, dear,’ said Madame Doubtfire, ‘the children’s father phoned.’ ‘Oh God, what did he want this time?’ (pp. 18-20)

Table 5 Puffin Books

		Male		Female	
<i>Just</i>	Daniel	18	(25%)	Doubtfire	9 (12%)
	Christopher	4	(5%)	Miranda	17 (24%)
				Lydia	19 (26%)
				Natalie	4 (5%)
				Others	2 (3%)
	Total	22	(30%)	Total	51 (70%)

Table 6 Penguin Readers Level 3

	Male		Female	
<i>Just</i>	Daniel	8 (29%)	Doubtfire	4 (14%)
	Christopher	4 (14%)	Miranda	5 (18%)
			Lydia	6 (21%)
			Natalie	1 (4%)
	Total	12 (43%)	Total	16 (57%)

From these tables, it is true that in both texts 'just' is used more frequently by women, but we cannot say it is a strong tendency. For example, Miranda uses 'just' less often than Daniel. It is clear that Lydia likes to use 'just', but her sister Natalie does not use it so much. Instead, Christopher often uses it in both texts. In addition, as for Daniel, he often uses 'just' when he is himself, but he does not use it so frequently when he is disguised as the woman. In fact, the number of times he uses it decreases in half when he is Madame Doubtfire. Interestingly, in (8a), it is Madame Doubtfire who uses 'just', but in narrative passages before and after this line, the writer explains the situation from Daniel's point of view. It is just as if it were Daniel who uttered this line, not Madame Doubtfire. Therefore, 'just' is indeed used more often by women, but compared with 'so' and 'very', we cannot say that it is a feminine word.

4. 4 Tag questions

Fourthly, I searched how tag questions⁷⁾ are used. Some linguists have considered tag questions feminine, but others⁸⁾ have not necessarily agreed. Holmes (1992), for example, says that it is not true that women use tag questions more often than men. But she argues that men and women use tag questions for a different purpose. That is, men use them to confirm uncertain information, while women use them to express their opinion politely. However, in this paper, I will not consider for what purpose tag questions are used, but only investigate how many times they are used and by whom.

(9) a. Daniel scooped up his small daughter, and gave her a squeeze. 'Oh, Natty,' he said.

'It's hard for you sometimes, isn't it?' (p. 2)

b. 'Poor Natty, it's hard for you, isn't it?' said Daniel and gave her a kiss. (p. 1)

- (10) a. Christopher shook himself irritably, and turned to Lydia for help. She answered for him. 'Of *course* he wanted to come. So did I. So did Natty. Why should we want to stay there every afternoon with someone we don't even know, someone who's always saying: "I'm not sure about that, dear. We'll just have to wait until your mother comes home, and then ask her." We don't. We'd rather be round here with you. Far rather. But it isn't going to happen, is it? She's not going to let us, and I'm not going to cry about it!' (pp. 29-30)
- b. 'We like being here with you much more than being there with somebody we don't really know. But it isn't going to happen, is it?' said Lydia. (p. 8)

Table 7 Puffin Books

	Male		Female	
Tag Question	Daniel	13 (35%)	Doubtfire	10 (27%)
	Christopher	2 (6%)	Miranda	6 (16%)
			Lydia	4 (11%)
			Others	2 (5%)
	Total	15 (41%)	Total	22 (59%)

Table 8 Penguin Readers Level 3

	Male		Female	
Tag Question	Daniel	1 (11%)	Doubtfire	2 (22%)
			Miranda	1 (11%)
			Lydia	5 (56%)
	Total	1 (11%)	Total	8 (89%)

From these tables, we can see that women tend to use tag questions more often than men. Lydia uses them more often than Christopher in both texts. In the Penguin Readers edition, Lydia uses tag questions more often than any other character, and Daniel, too, uses them more often when he is disguised as Madame Doubtfire. On the other hand, in the Puffin Books edition, women use tag questions more frequently, but Daniel uses them more often than Miranda and Lydia. Therefore, with regard to tag questions, it can be said that male-female differences in language use appear more clearly in the graded readers edition than the original text. In this respect, tag questions are different from 'so', 'very', and 'just'.

4.5 Commands

Lastly, I will check how commands⁹⁾ are used. In Edelsky (1977), commands are regarded as neuter by adults but masculine by sixth graders. Some linguists¹⁰⁾ also consider them masculine.

- (11) a. Christopher pulled it out and tried to thrust it into Natalie's hand. 'Here, Natty,' he said. 'Give this to Dad.' (p. 1)
 b. Christopher pulled it out and said 'Here, Natty, give this to Dad.' (p. 1)
- (12) a. She [= Lydia] turned on her sister. 'Now just stop being so wet, Natty. He hasn't hurt the tea cosy. Or Mum. He just gets annoyed. He can't control himself. You're simply going to have to learn to ignore him.' (p. 7)
 b. She turned to her sister. 'Stop being a baby, Natty. He hasn't hurt the teapot. Or Mum. He can't control himself. You just have to learn not to notice.' (p. 4)

Table 9 Puffin Books

	Male		Female	
Command	Daniel	37 (38%)	Doubtfire	12 (12%)
	Christopher	13 (13%)	Miranda	14 (15%)
	Driver	4 (4%)	Lydia	5 (5%)
			Natalie	10 (10%)
			Others	3 (3%)
	Total	54 (55%)	Total	44 (45%)

Table 10 Penguin Readers Level 3

	Male		Female	
Command	Daniel	10 (32%)	Doubtfire	4 (13%)
	Christopher	6 (20%)	Miranda	10 (32%)
			Lydia	1 (3%)
	Total	16 (52%)	Total	15 (48%)

From these tables, in the Puffin Books edition, although the number of male characters are smaller, more than half of the examples are used by men. Looking at characters individually, we notice that Daniel uses commands far more often than Miranda, and Christopher uses them more frequently than his sister Lydia. But as for the Penguin Readers edition, we cannot see male-female differences so clearly. That is, both Daniel and Miranda use commands ten

times. Therefore, as for this item, it can be said that unlike tag questions, male-female differences in language use are less clear in the graded readers edition.

5. Conclusion

From the analysis in the previous section, we can say as follows. In the growth process of children, there is a stage when they tend to make an 'overgeneralization' that some linguistic expressions are restricted to one gender. We can presume that they are influenced by their environment. But graded readers, which children like to read, do not strongly emphasize male-female differences in language use. As for tag questions only, we can see gender differences more clearly in the graded readers edition than the original one. With regard to other expressions, such as 'so', 'very', and 'just', the two texts are not so different. In addition, as for commands, which are considered neuter by adults but masculine by sixth graders, the graded readers edition shows male-female differences less clearly than the original.

However, we must admit that women do use 'feminine' expressions more often than men in the graded readers edition as well as the original one. That is, women do tend to use 'so', 'very', 'just' and tag questions. In other words, the graded readers edition does not emphasize male-female differences, but the characteristics of the original text remains strongly in the graded readers edition. Therefore, gender differences in language use do exist very clearly. Claridge (2005) examines several books of Oxford Bookworms Library, and concludes that graded readers are 'authentic' because they preserve the characteristics of the original. This is also true of Penguin Readers. The graded readers edition of *Madame Doubtfire* clearly shows gender differences in language use, which are also clearly seen in the original. Therefore, it can be said that graded readers do have something to do with children's 'overgeneralization'. If we want children not to make such an overgeneralization, we may have to delete gender differences in the original.

There is one thing I cannot explain even after this analysis. I cannot make out why Daniel uses feminine expressions more often when he is himself. According to my survey in this paper, all feminine words except 'very' are used less frequently when Daniel is disguised as Madame Doubtfire. It is partly because Daniel has many more lines than Madame Doubtfire.

However, we can also presume that Daniel might not be so conscious of feminine words. He may be more concerned with feminine accents. Whatever the reason, I would like to investigate this point further in the future.

Notes

1. The original text, which was written by British writer Anne Fine, was first published by Hamish Hamilton in 1987. Later in 1995, however, Puffin Books published its revised version, which I use as 'the original text' in this paper. Pearson Education, on the other hand, published its graded readers edition as one of the level 3 books of Penguin Readers. I use it as 'the graded readers edition'.
2. The story goes like this. When Daniel and Miranda got divorced, Daniel had no steady source of income. Miranda got primary custody of their three children, and the kids were allowed to visit their father every Saturday. Daniel was not happy with this decision and he wanted to see them more often. One day when Miranda came to pick up the kids, she let Daniel read an advertisement for a housekeeper. He sabotaged the ad so that only he could apply for the job. He called Miranda pretending to be a sixty-year-old woman from England, and gave her the name 'Mrs. Doubtfire' after seeing the newspaper headline "Police Doubt Fire Was Accidental". As Mrs. Doubtfire, Daniel was able to see his children every day. He made them do household chores and their homework, but he also read stories for Natalie and played soccer with Christopher. But Daniel's cover was blown when Christopher walked in on him standing at the toilet. He then explained the situation to Christopher and Lydia, and asked them not to tell Natalie and Miranda. Both children were happy to have their father back, and agreed to keep it secret. But finally Daniel's double life ended. The CEO of the television studio asked him to have dinner with him, and Miranda invited Mrs. Doubtfire to dinner with her children and her new boyfriend Stuart on the same day and at the same restaurant. Daniel could not cancel either, and he went to the restaurant and changed clothes in the bathroom while going back and forth between his boss and his family. When Stuart began to choke, Mrs. Doubtfire performed abdominal thrusts on him, and the mask was beginning to be ripped off. Miranda was very shocked to learn that her beloved housekeeper was actually her ex-husband. The judge found Daniel's behavior disturbing and gave custody solely to Miranda. However, Miranda did not seek a housekeeper any more but arranged for the children to spend every afternoon with Daniel.
3. There is a following explanation on the back cover of Penguin Readers books.
Penguin Readers are simplified texts designed in association with Longman, the world famous educational publisher, to provide a step-by-step approach to the joys of reading for pleasure. Each book has an introduction and extensive activity material. They are published at seven levels from Easystarts (200 words) to Advanced (3000 words).
Three things are clearly indicated here. First, the level of a book is indicated according to the number of words. It is also shown that which genre this book is classified into: whether it is

Contemporary, Classics, or Originals. In addition, it is indicated whether it is written in British English or American English. *Madame Doubtfire* belongs to Level 3 (1200 words), which is a Pre-Intermediate level, and it is classified into Contemporary, written in British English.

4. Edelsky (1977 : 233) selected 12 items and conducted a survey on 122 adults (52 men and 70 women) and 122 children (64 boys and 58 girls). She chose examples based on Lakoff (1975). From the following results of her research, it is quite obvious that sixth graders make an 'overgeneralization' that some linguistic items are masculine and others are feminine.

Variables	Age groups			
	First graders	Third graders	Sixth graders	Adults
<i>Adorable</i>	W	W*	W*	W*
<i>Damn it</i>	M*	M*	M*	M
<i>Damn + Adjective</i>	-	M*	M*	M
<i>I'll be damned</i>	-	M*	M*	M*
<i>Oh dear</i>	-	W*	W*	W*
<i>My goodness</i>	-	W	W*	W*
<i>Won't you please</i>	-	W	W*	W
Tag question	-	M / W	W	W
<i>So</i>	-	-	W	W
<i>Very</i>	-	-	W	W
<i>Just</i>	-	-	W	W
Command	-	-	M	M / W

W* = female, high consensus ; W = female, low consensus ;

M* = male, high consensus ; M = male, low consensus ;

M / W = neutral ; - = not meeting criteria.

5. In (3)-(12), I cite examples from the two texts of *Madame Doubtfire*. I cite examples from the original text in (a), and from the graded readers edition in (b). I have chosen examples which are not so different from each other. That is, I cite examples that can be found in both texts. Of course, there are some lines that we can find in the original but not in the graded readers edition and vice versa. After all, the graded readers edition consists of only 38 pages and 13 pages of them show a full-page illustration, while the original text is made up of as many as 181 pages with no illustrations at all.
6. 'Others' in Table 5 are Mrs. Hooper and Aunt Ruth (once each).
7. 'Others' in Table 7 are examples used by Mrs. Hooper.
8. Lakoff (1975) argues that women, who are in a weaker position, like to use tag questions because they are not so assertive. However, since she had no statistical evidence, her opinion was not supported by others. For example, Dubois and Crouch (1975) conducted a survey on how men and women talk to each other in a meeting at a university, and they found that 17 examples of formal tag questions ('weren't you?', 'does he?', or 'hasn't it?') and 16 examples

of informal tag questions ('right?' or 'ok?') were all used by men. Similarly, Lapadat and Seesahai (1977) examined informal conversations at the dormitory of the University of British Columbia and discovered that men used tag questions twice as much as women.

9. 'Others' in Table 9 are Mrs. Hooper (twice) and Aunt Ruth (once).
10. Lapadat and Seesahai (1977), for example, examined informal conversations at the dormitory of the University of British Columbia and discovered that men used direct imperatives 48 times while women used them only 16 times. On the other hand, women used indirect imperatives more often than men. However, when they checked only women, they found that women used direct imperatives twice as often as indirect imperatives.

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