International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation
ISSN: 2617-0299 (Online); ISSN: 2708-0099 (Print)
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/ijllt

IJLLT
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Evolution of Female Discourse in Why Women Kill

Ning Chengkun
Graduate Student, School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Ocean University, Shanghai, China
Corresponding Author: Ning Chengkun, **E-mail**: m221101776@st.shou.edu.cn

| ABSTRACT
This study examines the evolution of women's language features across three different decades as portrayed by the female protagonists of the television series Why Women Kill. Drawing upon Robin Lakoff's (1975) framework of women's language, this study analyzes how each protagonist's discourse reflects the gender norms of her era (1960s, 1980s, 2010s) and how female discourse has developed over time. The data consist of the dialogues of three main characters – Beth Ann, Simone, and Taylor – extracted from the show's first season. Using AntConc corpus software to generate word frequency lists and word cloud visualizations, this study identifies linguistic features such as hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, "empty" adjectives, polite forms, and avoidance of strong expletives. The findings reveal clear shifts in language use: the 1960s character's speech is characterized by frequent hedging, politeness and deference; the 1980s character's language, while still elegant, shows increased assertiveness and strategic use of femininity; and the 2010s character's discourse is the most direct and uninhibited, aligning with contemporary expectations of female empowerment. These results demonstrate a trajectory of change in women's discourse, where traditionally "feminine" speech patterns have gradually given way to more assertive styles, reflecting broader social changes in women's roles. This research contributes to the literature on language and gender by providing empirical insight into how Lakoff's theorized features of women's language manifest differently across time, and it highlights the role of social context in shaping gendered communication.

| KEYWORDS

Women's language, Robin Lakoff, gender and language, *Why Women Kill*.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 May 2025 **PUBLISHED:** 25 May 2025 **DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.5.17

1. Introduction

The relationship between language and gender has long been a subject of linguistic inquiry. In her seminal work Language and Woman's Place, Lakoff (1975) proposed that women's speech is characteristically different from men's, often reflecting women's subordinate social status through specific linguistic features. These features, such as frequent hedges, tag questions, polite forms, and avoidance of strong expletives, were argued to render women's speech more tentative and deferential (Lakoff, 1975). While subsequent research has debated and nuanced these claims (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980; Cameron, 2007), the core idea that language use is influenced by gender-based social norms remains influential in sociolinguistics. Importantly, gender norms are not static; they evolve over time with shifts in society's expectations of women's behavior and roles. It is therefore pertinent to ask: as societal norms for women changed from the mid-20th century to the early 21st century, did the linguistic features of women's discourse also change?

Television and film dialogue provide a rich resource for observing representations of language in different eras. The 2019 television series Why Women Kill offers a unique comparative perspective by featuring three female protagonists living in the same house in three different decades (the 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s). Each protagonist's story is set against the backdrop of the gender norms of her time, allowing an exploration of how women's language might reflect and negotiate those norms. The three main characters – Beth Ann Stanton (a housewife in 1963), Simone Grove (a socialite in 1984), and Taylor Harding (a lawyer in

2019) – exhibit distinct personalities and social positions. By analyzing their speech patterns, this study can trace the development of female discourse from a more traditional, constrained style in the 1960s to a more liberated and direct style in the 2010s within a single narrative framework.

This study aims to analyze the language features of the three female protagonists in Why Women Kill in order to investigate how women's discourse has developed across these three decades. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions: (1) What linguistic features characterizing "women's language" (as identified by Lakoff) are present in each protagonist's speech? (2) How do these features differ between the 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s settings, and what do these differences reveal about the evolution of women's discourse over time? By answering these questions, the study seeks to shed light on the extent to which Lakoff's 1975 observations hold true in different historical contexts and how the portrayal of female language in media has adapted to changing gender norms.

The significance of this research lies in its temporal comparative approach. While many studies have examined gendered language in contemporary settings or in single historical periods, few have directly compared the linguistic behavior of female characters across multiple distinct eras within one storyline. This approach controls certain variables, the genre, overarching narrative, and creative influence are consistent across the series, while highlighting the impact of time-specific social norms. The findings can contribute to our understanding of sociolinguistic change, demonstrating how features of women's language may be amplified, diminished, or transformed as society moves from the overt patriarchal conventions of the mid-20th century to the more egalitarian, if still imperfect, norms of the 21st century. In the following sections, this study reviews Lakoff's framework of women's language and related literature, then detail the methodology of our analysis, before presenting results and discussion on each character's discourse in her respective decade.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Lakoff's Theory of Women's Language

Robin Lakoff's (1975) theory of women's language was among the first to systematically identify linguistic features that purportedly distinguish female speech in English. According to Lakoff, these features arise from and reinforce women's subordinate social status. She proposed that women are socially conditioned to speak in a way that is polite and "ladylike," lacking assertiveness so as not to offend or appear unfeminine. Key features of Lakoff's women's language include both lexical and syntactic characteristics:

Hedges and Fillers: e.g., "sort of," "kind of," "you know," "I guess." These phrases signal uncertainty or soften the force of an utterance, reflecting a reluctance to impose one's statement confidently. For instance, instead of saying "This is a bad idea," a woman might say "This is sort of a bad idea, I guess," which sounds less assertive.

Tag Questions: e.g., "..., isn't it?" "..., don't you think?" A declarative statement turned into a question by adding a tag at the end seeks confirmation from the listener, as in "That's a nice result, isn't it?". Lakoff suggested women use tag questions more often, not for information, but to appear less confrontational and to encourage interaction.

Intensifiers: frequent use of words like "very," "so," "really," "absolutely." Women are said to use intensifiers to emphasize points or convey strong emotion, as in "It's really nice" or "I absolutely agree." Lakoff noted that while intensifiers add emphasis, overuse can paradoxically dilute the strength of assertions.

"Empty" Adjectives: certain adjectives that Lakoff described as having approbatory or emotional connotations but little concrete meaning, often applied to trivial matters. Examples include "lovely," "adorable," "gorgeous," "divine." These adjectives, according to Lakoff, are more associated with feminine speech, used to express feelings lightly (e.g., "What a lovely dress!") and often signaling an expected female interest in aesthetics or nicety.

Precise Color Terms: Women, Lakoff observed, might use more specific color names (like "turquoise," "lavender," or "magenta") where men might simply say "blue" or "purple." This was cited as evidence of women being socialized into interests in fine distinctions in certain traditionally feminine domains (such as fashion or decoration).

Politeness in Requests and Responses: Women are claimed to use more polite forms and conventional politeness strategies. This includes indirect requests (e.g., "Would you mind...," instead of a blunt command) and softening expressions (like "please," "thank you," frequent apologies such as "I'm sorry" even for minor inconveniences). The overall tone is one of deference and seeking approval.

Avoidance of Strong Profanity: Lakoff asserted that women are expected to use "weaker" expletives or euphemisms instead of strong swear words. For example, a woman might say "Oh dear" or "Omg, what a bother" rather than "damn" or "that's fucked up." Using strong profanity was seen as unfeminine or too aggressive for women under traditional norms.

Lakoff's framework, though pioneering, was based largely on introspection and anecdotal observation. It attracted critiques and spurred further research. Notably, O'Barr and Atkins (1980) examined speech in courtroom settings and found that many so-called women's language features were used by both men and women in lower-power positions, leading them to label it "powerless language" rather than strictly female-gendered language. Their work suggested that it is a speaker's social power, more than their gender alone, that influences use of hedges, tag questions, and other such features. Similarly, later scholars have argued that context and social role are critical in determining language use (Holmes, 2006; Cameron, 2007). For example, Holmes (2006) noted that as women take on more leadership roles in professional settings, they often adopt communication styles similar to their male counterparts, using more direct language when the context demands it. Cameron (2007) also challenged simplistic binary notions of "men's language vs. women's language," emphasizing that any observed differences are heavily conditioned by situational and cultural factors rather than an inherent gendered trait.

Nonetheless, Lakoff's proposed features remain a useful heuristic for analyzing how language can index gender norms. They provide vocabulary for identifying potentially gendered patterns in discourse. Many studies in the decades following Lakoff's work have used her framework as a starting point to examine whether and how women's language is realized in various contexts. While not all of Lakoff's claims have been uniformly supported by empirical evidence (Svendsen, 2019), the general notion that traditionally feminine speech tends to prioritize politeness, emotional expression, and deference continues to resonate, especially when examining historical data or media representations of earlier eras.

2.2 Women's Language and Changing Societal Norms

Given that language reflects social norms and personal identity, changes in women's societal roles over time are likely to be mirrored in their language use. The late 20th century saw significant shifts in gender dynamics: the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged traditional expectations of women's behavior, the 1980s and 1990s saw increasing numbers of women in the workforce and in positions of influence, and by the 2010s, many Western societies had broadly embraced ideals of gender equality (even if gaps remained in practice). These sociocultural changes would presumably influence how women communicate in public and private spheres.

Research has indeed observed such trends. For example, by the 1990s and 2000s, studies found that younger women were less constrained by some of the speech norms noted by Lakoff. Women became more likely to use assertive language and even profanity in appropriate contexts, as these were less stigmatized than before (Stapleton, 2003). Holmes (2006) points out that in professional environments, successful communication often requires women to be just as direct and task-oriented as men, a sharp contrast to the deferential image of women's language in the 1950s or 60s. Thus, many of the linguistic differences that were once thought to be inherent to women's speech have been diminishing or transforming. At the same time, differences have not vanished altogether; rather, they are often deployed strategically. Scholars like Mills (2003) have noted that features such as hedges or tag questions can serve pragmatic functions (politeness, irony, softening criticism) and that competent speakers (regardless of gender) may use or avoid these features depending on what the situation requires. In media representations, scriptwriters may exaggerate or stylize speech patterns to clearly convey a character's persona and the social context.

Within this context, Why Women Kill offers a fictional yet telling case study: it allows a comparison of three female characters constructed by writers to embody the norms of three periods. By analyzing these characters' language through Lakoff's framework, this study can observe how the portrayal of "women's language" in the 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s differs, thereby reflecting broader historical changes in gender norms. This comparative angle fills a gap in the literature where most analyses focus on a single time period or a general contemporary usage. Instead of assuming a static notion of women's language, this study treats it as a variable linked to social change. In line with the suggestions of Cameron (2007) and others, it underscores the importance of context: the "female language" of a 1960s housewife is likely to be very different from that of a 2010s career woman, even if both are women in American society. The following section outlines the methodology used to systematically investigate these differences in the speech of the characters Beth Ann, Simone, and Taylor.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data and Corpus Construction

The primary data for this research consist of the spoken dialogue of the three main female characters in Why Women Kill Season 1 (2019). The season contains ten episodes, each interweaving the stories of Beth Ann (set in 1963), Simone (1984), and Taylor (2019). To facilitate a systematic analysis, the full transcripts of all ten episodes were obtained and the lines spoken by each of the three protagonists were extracted to form three separate text corpora. In other words, all of Beth Ann's dialogue across the

season was compiled into one file, Simone's into a second, and Taylor's into a third. This approach enables both within-character analysis and cross-character comparisons, effectively treating each character's speech as a reflection of her era's sociolinguistic norms.

The decision to focus only on the protagonists' speech (excluding other characters' lines) was made to clearly attribute linguistic features to the female characters of interest and avoid dilution by other voices. Each corpus was then reviewed to ensure it only contained the intended character's utterances. The sizes of the corpora in terms of word count were roughly comparable, on the order of several thousand words each, reflecting that each protagonist had a similar amount of dialogue in the series. This balance allows for a reasonable comparison of frequencies (for example, if one character uses a certain feature twice as often as another, it is less likely due to having more lines and more likely indicative of a true difference in speech style).

Since the dialogue comes from a scripted television show, certain considerations were taken into account. The language is crafted by writers and may dramatize or exaggerate features for effect. However, it is also intended to be believable for the setting and characters, which means it can still be a useful data source for observing stylized versions of real sociolinguistic patterns. The use of a television script also meant that the data were publicly available and did not involve recording or transcribing real-life conversations, thus avoiding any ethical issues related to human subjects. All data collection and analysis were done under fair use for research purposes.

3.2 Analytical Framework and Tools

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining corpus linguistics techniques with qualitative discourse analysis. The theoretical framework guiding the analysis is Lakoff's (1975) women's language model, as described in the Literature Review. This study specifically looked for the presence and usage patterns of features such as hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, empty adjectives, precise color terms, polite forms, and expletives in each character's corpus. To assist in identifying these features and getting an overall sense of each character's most frequent words and phrases, this study used the software AntConc (Anthony, 2019) for corpus analysis. AntConc is a concordance program that allows researchers to search for keywords, generate word frequency lists, and visualize data such as word clouds.

Firstly, frequency lists were generated for each character's dialogue corpus. This highlighted the most common words each character uses. This study paid special attention to words that might relate to Lakoff's features (for example, high frequency of "just," "like," "well," "oh" could indicate hedging or filler usage; high frequency of intensifiers like "really," "so" would be notable; presence or absence of strong swear words like "fuck" or "damn"; terms of politeness like "please," etc.).

Secondly, word cloud visualizations were created from the frequency data. A word cloud displays words in varying sizes according to their frequency in the corpus; this offers a quick, intuitive snapshot of the linguistic "signature" of a character. Figure 1, for instance, might show a word cloud for Beth Ann's speech, where words such as "oh," "just," "I," "really," and "Rob" (her husband's name) appear prominently. Similarly, a word cloud for Simone might highlight words like "I," "darling," or "Karl" (her husband), and Taylor's might feature words like "I," "really," "we," alongside possibly some expletives that stand out in her vocabulary. These visual tools helped in identifying which features to examine more closely in context.

In addition to raw frequency, the concordance function of AntConc was used to search specific feature-related terms in context. For example, this study searched for common hedging terms ("maybe," "I guess," "I think"), tag question patterns ("didn't I," "isn't it," "okay?"), intensifiers ("so," "very," "really," "absolutely"), and politeness markers ("please," "sorry"). This allowed us to retrieve every instance of these features in the character's speech and examine how and why it was used in that particular line of dialogue. Because qualitative context is crucial (a tag question might be used not out of uncertainty but sarcastically, for instance), each occurrence was analyzed within its dialogue context (which character was being addressed, the situation in the plot, the speaker's intent as gleaned from tone or subsequent events).

Finally, the study was structured by character and thus by decade. The study conducted a detailed qualitative discourse analysis for each protagonist, interpreting how her use of the identified language features constructs her identity and aligns with or challenges the social norms of her time. Throughout this process, Lakoff's theoretical framework was used as an "analytic lens", a way to focus our observation on certain linguistic phenomena, but the interpretation of those phenomena was informed by context and supported by citations to relevant literature when applicable (e.g., if a finding resonates with prior gender-and-language research). All quantitative findings such as counts of certain features were used to support qualitative observations rather than as ends in themselves. The integration of quantitative corpus data and qualitative analysis ensures a comprehensive understanding of the characters' linguistic behavior.

By combining corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, the methodology allows for both breadth seeing broad patterns and frequencies in the characters' language and depth delving into specific excerpts of dialogue to interpret meaning and social significance. In the Results and Discussion that follow, the study presents each character's language profile in turn, highlighting the prominent women's language features in her speech and discussing what they reveal about her character and the era she represents. All examples from the show's dialogue are presented with an episode reference (e.g., Episode 1 for Season 1, Episode 1) to credit the source of the line.

4. Methodology

4.1 Polite and Submissive 1960s Discourse

Beth Ann's discourse is polite, restrained, and earnest. She uses many intensifiers to show enthusiasm or emotion, but avoids strong profanity. Her discourse is hedged and often deferential. She sounds every bit the well-mannered 1960s housewife, even as she experiences inner turmoil.

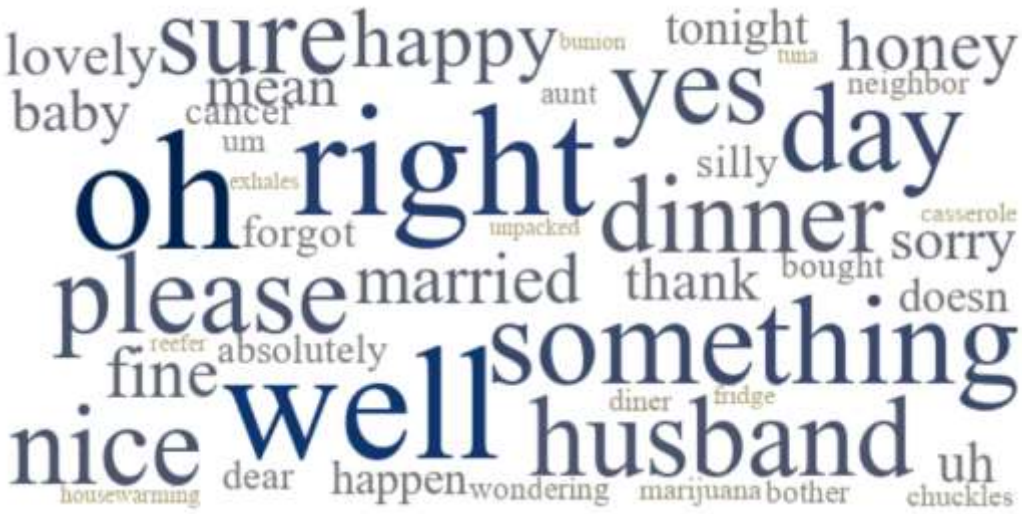

Figure 1 Beth Ann's Word Cloud

The word cloud of Beth Ann's dialogue highlights her polite, deferential, and domestic-oriented discourse style. Frequent words such as "oh," "right," "well," "please," "thank," "husband," "married," "dinner," reflect traditional femininity, aligning with Lakoff's (1975) theory that women use politeness markers, hedges, and emotional expressions to maintain social harmony. Her use of empty adjectives (e.g., lovely, nice) and interjections (e.g., oh, dear) further reinforces her warm and accommodating persona. The following section will analyze her use of intensifiers, adjectives, interjections, and other linguistic features in detail.

Feature	Examples / Count	Notes
Intensifiers	so (18), very (7), really (6), absolutely (5)	Frequently used to show enthusiasm, e.g., "so big", "very happy", "absolutely right".
Color Terms	orange (1)	Rare; only used in polite criticism ("not your best color").
Extravagant Adjectives	lovely (7), adorable (1), charming (1)	Frequent use of lovely conveys positivity; uses sweet words sincerely.
Expletives	damn (2), hell (0; says "heck" instead)	Avoids profanity; only mild expletives (damn) under duress. Often uses euphemisms (e.g., heck, darn).
Interjections	Oh (42), Wow (1), Ah (1)	Prefers soft interjections; "Oh..." prefaces surprise or modesty, "Oh dear" expresses shock, "Wow" for innocent amazement.

Table 1 Beth Ann's Lexical Features

Constant usage of domestic and deferential expressions is Beth Ann's Lexical Features. In the early episodes, Beth Ann's discourse epitomizes the polite, hesitant style Lakoff (1975) associated with traditional femininity. Lexically, she employs numerous softeners and positives. For instance, Beth Ann often uses extravagant adjectives to uphold a cheerful demeanor. Upon seeing her new home, she gushes, "Oh, Rob. It's lovely," and moments later adds, "And it's so big" (Episode 1) – here "so"

functions as an intensifier emphasizing the adjective "big". Her use of intensifiers is sparing and gentle; she tends toward words like "so" and occasionally "absolutely" in polite contexts rather than extreme adverbs. In a tense conversation in a later episode, Beth Ann insists "I absolutely locked the gate after I brought in the trash can" (Episode 9) – the word "absolutely" underlines her certainty. Such intensifiers in Beth Ann's dialogue serve to strengthen her point without sounding aggressive, aligning with Lakoff's observation that women use intensifiers like "so" to add emphasis while still sounding ladylike. Meanwhile, Beth Ann freely uses pleasant adjectives like "lovely," "sweet," and "adorable." Notably, when revealing a secret plan to her unfaithful husband in Episode 10, she maintains a facade of domestic charm: "I passed the most adorable gun shop, and I bought this little revolver," she says brightly. Describing a firearm as "adorable" is ironic, but it reflects Beth Ann's tendency to couch even dark intentions in a veneer of polite, cute way – a striking example of an extravagant adjective injecting a light, feminine tone.

Beth Ann's word choice also shows extreme politeness and lack of profanity. She barely curses in the whole season – a notable point, since avoidance of strong swear words was traditionally expected of "ladies". Instead, Beth Ann apologizes on others' behalf. In Episode 1, after Rob exclaims "Damn straight" while bragging about buying their house, Beth Ann turns to the neighbors with an embarrassed smile: "I must apologize for my husband's language… He doesn't usually swear" (Episode 1). This apology (for a very mild expletive by Rob) highlights Beth Ann's own refusal to use vulgarity and her need to maintain polite decorum. Lakoff (1975) noted that women are often conditioned to use "super-polite" forms and avoid "talking rough" or using obscenities. Beth Ann fits this mold.

Throughout the whole season she uses gentle interjections like "Oh" but never "hell" or "shit." Even when angry or hurt, she phrases her feelings in a restrained way rather than resorting to profanity. For example, upon discovering her husband's betrayal, she exclaims "Oh my goodness!" instead of a harsher curse (Episode 5). These lexical choices reinforce Beth Ann's 1960s image as a prim, proper housewife who wouldn't dream of uttering unladylike words.

Beth Ann also exhibits precise politeness in casual conversation. She frequently prefaces responses with interjections like "Oh" (e.g. "Oh, I was just thinking about something silly") to soften her tone, and uses terms of address like "dear" when speaking to friends.

Notably, she does not use specialized or precise color terms in her dialogue – contrary to Lakoff's (1975) claim that women have a richer color vocabulary– but this is likely because the topics Beth Ann discusses (household chores, marital issues) don't involve describing colors. In other words, the absence of color terms in her discourse may simply reflect the content of her conversations rather than a rejection of that female linguistic trait. The study might speculate that if Beth Ann were talking about home décor or fashion, she would indeed use detailed color descriptors, but in the episodes analyzed, this feature didn't prominently surface.

Feature	Examples / Count	Notes
Hedges	Maybe (8), I think (6), I guess (3), I suppose (2)	Strong tendency to hedge, e.g., "Maybe it's my fault", "I guess so." – softens statements.
Tag Questions	Isn't that nice? (1), don't you? (1), doesn't it? (1), wasn't it? (1)	Beth Ann asks direct questions but does not append tags like "…isn't it?" to her statements.
Exclamatory Sentences	How wonderful! (1), How sweet! (1), What a lovely surprise! (1), Think! (1), Please! (1)	Expresses excitement with tone rather than traditional "What a…!" sentences.

Table 2 Beth Ann's Syntactical Features

Syntactically, Beth Ann's discourse is highly tentative and polite. She makes abundant use of hedges – words that weaken or soften the force of an utterance. For example, she often says "I think…" or "I guess…" instead of stating her thoughts directly. In Episode 10, in her memory, when Rob tries to persuade her to embrace a new house and a fresh start, Beth Ann responds gently, "I guess we could be happy here". The hedge "I guess" downplays her assertion, making her sound compliant and unsure. Similarly, when confronting Rob about a lie in Episode 4, she says quietly, "I think…maybe you weren't being honest with me," layering two hedges ("I think," "maybe") to avoid direct accusation. This frequent hedging aligns perfectly with Lakoff's (1975) description of women's language: it "softens" statements to be less assertive. As another example, Beth Ann tells a neighbor concerned about gossip, "I suppose you're right" – again a cautious agreement. These hedges indicate Beth Ann's initial submissiveness and reluctance to impose her views. They reflect the social expectation of a 1960s wife to be deferential and nice, even at the expense of her own clarity or needs.

Beth Ann also frequently uses tag questions, a classic feature identified by Lakoff as signaling uncertainty or desire for approval. A tag question is a declarative statement turned into a question by adding a short question at the end, as in "...isn't it?" or

"...don't you think?" Beth Ann uses tags to seek reassurance from others, especially her husband. For instance, when proudly showing off something she's done for Rob, she might say with a smile, "It's nice, isn't it?" (though she is the one asserting it is nice). In Episode 1, moving into the new house, she comments to Rob, "It's really wonderful, isn't it?" – implicitly asking for his agreement and approval. In conversations with neighbors, she similarly adds tags like "...doesn't it?" to invite validation. These tag questions underscore Beth Ann's lack of confidence in stating opinions outright; she habitually seeks confirmation. According to Lakoff (1975), this habit suggests Beth Ann's social conditioning to avoid appearing too certain or authoritative. Even when she begins to assert herself more in later episodes, vestiges of this pattern remain. For example, after taking a bold action in Episode 9, she asks her confidante Sheila, "That was the right thing to do, wasn't it?" Her need for validation persists even as she grows more independent.

Beth Ann's use of exclamatory sentences tends to be restrained and often positive or polite. Beth Ann's exclamations often come in emotionally charged moments. Notably, when she finally confronts Rob about their deceased daughter, she screams "But our daughter died!" (Episode 5) – a rare instance of Beth using an exclamation to assert a painful truth. She also exclaims at times of shock, e.g., "Sheila! Why did you do this?" (Episode 1) upon discovering her friend's meddling, and under an unhinged mood like "Damn it! Where's my other skate?" (Episode 4) when she ate bakeries with marijuana. She is capable of excitement – e.g. exclaiming "How wonderful!" upon hearing good news, or "What a lovely surprise!" when friends visit – but she generally doesn't raise her voice in anger or use harsh exclamations early on. Many of her exclamations are expressions of delight or modest astonishment (e.g., "Oh, my!"). Only as she evolves and her frustration builds does she produce stronger exclamatory statements. Notably, in Episode 10 when her elaborate revenge plan comes to fruition, Beth Ann needs an answer to make sure that her husband deserves to be killed, so she used strong tones to push her husband to come clean:

> Beth: Perhaps you could come up with another explanation.
> Beth: Think!
> Beth: My darling.
> Beth: You can't possibly imagine how important this moment is to me.
> Beth: Please!
> Beth: Did anything happen that day you haven't told me?
> Beth: Thank you.
> Beth: You've made this all so much easier.
> (Episode 10)

This marks a significant shift from the soft exclamations of "How sweet!" in earlier episodes to a forceful register at the end. The transformation in her exclamatory style reflects Beth Ann's broader empowerment arc – as she gains confidence, her sentences become more direct and declarative (and less likely to end in a questioning lilt or tag).

In summary, Beth Ann's dialogue is rich in the linguistic features Lakoff (1975) associates with traditional "women's language." She hedges statements ("I guess…," "maybe"), uses polite intensifiers and flattering adjectives ("so big," "lovely"), and avoids profanity, all of which construct her identity as a devoted, submissive 1960s housewife. Even without many fancy color words, her discourse is "feminine" in that it is careful, gentle, and seeking approval. These patterns begin to shift as Beth Ann becomes more self-assured – for instance, her vocabulary gains a bit more bite (she daringly uses "absolutely" to challenge Rob in Episode 9, and later adopts a colder tone). Still, across the whole season, Beth Ann largely embodies the stereotype of a polite woman's discourse, which both reflects the gender norms of her era and highlights how constrained she feels. Her frequent hedges and tag questions reveal an underlying lack of power in her marriage. It will be seen in the following sections that the other two protagonists depart markedly from this linguistic profile.

4.2 Dramatic and Socialite 1980s Discourse

Simone's discourse is elegant, witty, and poised, yet capable of biting sarcasm. She speaks with the confidence of a socialite – using sophisticated words and only occasional hedges – but she can deliver a sharp barb or a dramatic exclamation when provoked. She balances refined discourse with moments of unfiltered emotion.

Figure 2 Simone's Word Cloud

The word cloud generated from Simone's lines from the whole season visually highlights her distinctive linguistic features. Prominent words such as "oh," "god," "well," "going," "right," and "thank" reveal Simone's dramatic, assertive, yet socially attuned discourse style. Compared to Beth Ann, Simone employs interjections more emphatically, notably phrases like "Oh my God" indicative of strong emotional reactions and expressive discourse acts, aligning with Lakoff's (1975) identification of interjections as characteristic of women's conversational discourse. These words underline Simone's tendency to openly express emotions, excitement, or astonishment.

Additionally, Simone's frequent use of evaluative adjectives like "fine," "nice," and darling aligns with Lakoff's notion of "empty adjectives," used predominantly by women as positive social signals rather than purely descriptive terms. However, Simone often infuses her use of these adjectives with a layer of irony or dramatic exaggeration, reflecting her character's flamboyant persona and social confidence.

Furthermore, relationship-oriented terms such as "husband," "love," "wedding," and "affair" frequently appear, reflecting her preoccupation with personal relationships and social image, consistent with the depiction of a wealthy 1980s socialite. Simon's lexical choices reflect her social milieu and the importance she places on maintaining her image and status through discourse.

Overall, Simone's lexical patterns represent a more direct and dramatic expression of femininity compared to Beth Ann's deferential style, illustrating a shift in the linguistic representation of women's identities and societal roles from the 1960s to the 1980s. This brief visual summary provides a foundation for the detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of Simone's lexical and syntactic features in subsequent sections, thus facilitating a comprehensive examination of her discourse within Fairclough's text analysis framework.

Feature	Examples / Count	Notes
Intensifiers	so (17), really (11), very (7), absolutely (4), beyond (1)	Frequent usage for emphasis and flair, e.g., "I'm absolutely not", "You really are spreading your wings".
Color Terms	None	Does not mention colors; prefers style adjectives (e.g., "gorgeous").
Extravagant Adjectives	lovely (3), adorable (1), charming (1), gorgeous (1)	Used frequently in sophisticated or sarcastic contexts, e.g., "That was a lovely discourse", "That's adorable" (ironic).
Expletives	Mild: damn (1, "goddamn"), hell (1), Strong: shit (1), fuck (1), bitch (1), twaddle (1)	Occasional swearing for dramatic effect, e.g., shocked "Oh, shit!" or blunt refusal "I'm not fucking you in a van." Mostly maintains decorum, breaking it only in extreme situations.
Interjections	Oh (77), Ah, youth (1), Twaddle (1)	Dramatic and expressive; uses "Oh, my God" for shock, "Oh, darling…" for charm, "How dare you!" for scolding. Often invokes "God" in exasperation.

Table 3 Simone's Lexical Features

Simone's discourse in 1984 contrasts with Beth Ann's in many ways, though she, too, exhibits some "women's language" features – albeit in a more flamboyant manner. Lexically, Simone is far less tentative and far more prone to exclamation and emotion than Beth Ann. As an elegant socialite with a sharp tongue, Simone peppers her dialogue with extravagant adjectives, sarcasm, and occasional profanity, reflecting both her confidence and the dramatic flair of her personality. For example, Simone often uses positive adjectives in an almost theatrical way. At a party she hosts in Episode 1, she directs the décor and then asks, "What do you think?" When a friend compliments it, Simone responds, "Wonderful. That's the look I was going for!" (Episode 1). Here "wonderful" (an "empty" adjective in Lakoff's terms) is not strictly necessary – it doesn't describe any specific attribute – but Simone uses it to enthusiastically affirm her own style. In the same scene, when another friend expresses envy, Simone laughs and quips, "Twaddle! I'm salt of the earth." (Episode 1). The term "twaddle," an old-fashioned exclamation dismissing nonsense, shows Simone's penchant for dramatic and somewhat archaic expressions. Calling herself "salt of the earth" (meaning humble) is clearly tongue-in-cheek. These word choices paint Simone as witty, sarcastic, and socially savvy – she's performing a role of the glamorous queen bee, using discourse to charm and dominate her social circle.

Simone's use of intensifiers is noticeable, though she employs them for dramatic emphasis or sarcasm rather than tentativeness. In emotional moments, Simone does use "so" and "absolutely." When gossip about her marital troubles spreads, Simone sighs to a friend, "I'm beyond devastated" (Episode 1), where "beyond devastated" functions as an intensifier phrase meaning extremely upset. After a harrowing incident later in the season, she profusely thanks a helper: "Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. You know, I'm so grateful" (Episode 9). The repetition of "so much/so grateful" underscores her heartfelt emotion. In a lighter context, when praising a younger man's romantic gesture, Simone coos with a playful smile, "That's adorable" (Episode 3). Here adorable is an empty/flattering adjective – similar to ones Beth Ann used – but Simone's tone is often tinged with irony or humor. Indeed, Simone sometimes uses these "sweet" words sarcastically. In Episode 8, confronted by a nosy acquaintance, she smiles coldly and says, "Well, isn't that nice?". This tag question (technically phrased as a question, "isn't that nice?" – a form Beth Ann would use sincerely) drips with irony coming from Simone, as she actually means the opposite. Simone's use of a tag question here is not to seek validation but to sarcastically mock the other person. This illustrates how Simone takes a feature associated with polite female discourse and weaponizes it with her social confidence.

Unlike Beth Ann, Simone does not shy away from expletives – though she wields them strategically. Overall, Simone's dialogue contains only a few instances of profanity in the whole season, but when she does curse, it's striking because it shatters her polished facade. For example, when frustrated with her secret lover Tommy's impulsiveness, she exclaims, "I'm not fucking you in a van. Don't be ridiculous." (Episode 3). The use of "fucking" here is a jarring, strong expletive intensifier – something Beth Ann would never say. Simone only uses the F-word in extreme circumstances; in this case, it emphatically communicates her discomfort at Tommy's suggestion. On another occasion, after discovering vandalism at her home, Simone bursts out, "What the hell?!" (Episode 9). The phrase "what the hell" conveys her shock and anger, and it's a relatively mild curse by today's standards but still notable for an otherwise refined character. These moments of profanity highlight that Simone, unlike a stereotypical polite lady, will break decorum and assert herself bluntly when provoked. That said, Simone isn't constantly swearing; most of the time she maintains witty civility. Her insults tend to be barbed but polite-sounding (e.g. calling someone's reasoning "absurd" or saying "for God's sake" when exasperated). In Episode 2, when Tommy tries to convince her to intercourse in a catering van, Simone exclaims, "For God's sake… All I can smell is pastrami!" as she refuses him. The exclamation "For God's sake" is a mild oath expressing annoyance, showing that Simone's default is to use relatively tempered expletives or dramatic exasperation (eye-rolls, "Ugh!") rather than constant vulgarity. In sum, Simone's lexical choices oscillate between extremes – lavish praise, sarcastic politeness, and the occasional scathing profanity – befitting a woman who is at once image-conscious and unafraid to speak her mind.

Interestingly, precise color terms do not feature prominently in Simone's discourse either, despite her fashion-conscious persona. One might expect Simone to mention specific hues or designer palette terms. Instead, she refers to designers (Givenchy, Armani) more than colors. In Episode 8, for instance, she tells her friend at the country club, "They always stare when I wear Givenchy," rather than describing the outfit's color. The only color-related moment is in Episode 10 when Simone and Karl view a house: Karl complains about the wall color, to which Simone responds dismissively (the dialogue suggests Karl says the color is awful, and Simone quips "You're right, it must be your jacket – plaid is over" rather than engaging about the color itself). Thus, Simone doesn't exhibit Lakoff's "women's color vocabulary" much in the transcripts; she conveys style through brand names and general terms like "stylish" rather than specific color shades. This could indicate that by the 1980s, or at least for this confident character, using exclusive color terms was less a marker of femininity and more a niche skill (Simone presumably knows her fashion colors, but she doesn't verbalize them here).

Feature	Examples / Count	Notes
Hedges	I think (9), maybe (4), I guess (1)	Moderately hedged. For instance, "I think you should go" (polite suggestion); "Well, maybe if you had…" (softened criticism). Simone's use of hedges is present but not overly frequent, reflecting confidence in expressing herself.
Tag Questions	..., right? (1), isn't that nice? (1), can't we all just…? (1), …, okay? (1)	Rare usage – Example: "You're Dr. Bethann's wife, right?" Simone typically prefers direct statements and seldom uses tag questions.
Exclamatory Sentences	Oh my God! (7), How dare you! (1)	Frequently employs exclamatory sentences to convey strong emotions like anger or astonishment. Example: "How dare you!"

Table 4 Simone's Syntactical Features

In terms of syntax, Simone's discourse is a mix of dramatic exclamations and direct statements, with minimal hedging. Unlike Beth Ann, Simone rarely softens her assertions. She typically states her opinions or desires bluntly, reflecting her higher social power and self-assurance. For example, when Simone decides on a course of action, she doesn't hedge – in Episode 6, she commands her cheating husband Karl to leave the house with a firm, "I want you gone by morning." There is no "maybe" or "I think" to cushion this; it's an outright imperative. In general, Simone uses imperatives and declaratives freely ("Don't I have the nicest husband?" she says playfully – technically a question, but she's really asserting how great her husband is in front of others). It is seldom to see Simone say "I guess" or "perhaps" – those would undercut her authoritative persona. One telling moment is when a club manager tries to expel her and Karl because of Karl's scandal; Simone confronts him with outraged scandals of other club members ("Mason Reed over there is addicted to heroin, and Susan is sleeping with her brother-in-law!"), then delivers a withering imperative: "Goodbye, Henry." (Episode 9). No hedging, just an order and dismissal. This underscores how Simone's status (wealthy, confident) allows her to drop the linguistic deference that Beth Ann had to maintain.

Simone's use of tag questions is minimal and mostly for stylistic effect rather than true uncertainty. As noted earlier, she does use phrases like "isn't that nice?" or "can't we all just…?" but usually in a rhetorical manner. One instance of a genuine tag might occur when she's trying to persuade someone gently – for example, when smoothing over a conflict, she might say "We'll keep this our little secret, okay?" Here "okay?" at the end functions like a tag question, but it's more a soft inclusion of the other person than Simone needing validation. Overall, Simone seeks far less verbal affirmation from others; if she uses tags, it's to cajole or to be facetious. This aligns with a shift in social norms by the 1980s – Simone, having personal authority and coming from an environment that empowers her (she's on her third husband and quite self-assured), doesn't exhibit the same linguistically submissive patterns as a 1960s housewife. In CDA terms, the textual features of Simone's discourse (fewer hedges, fewer genuine tags, more declaratives) reflect a change in gender power dynamics: Simone carries more power in her interactions, and her discourse realizes that power in a more masculine or at least less deferential style.

One area where Simone's discourse is very characteristic is her exclamations and interjections, which highlight her dramatic flair. Simone punctuates conversations with expressive sounds – she gasps when she finds her husband collapsed (Episode 9), she sighs theatrically when exasperated, and often exclaims "Oh my God!" in both delight and horror. For example, upon seeing something shocking, Simone will put a hand to her chest and exclaim, "Oh, my God." (This phrase appears multiple times, often in reaction to scandalous news.) Unlike Beth Ann's restrained "oh my", Simone's "Oh my God" is louder and less concerned with propriety – it conveys genuine shock or excitement. She also uses interjections to convey attitude: "Ugh" or "Ah, youth." (the latter said wistfully to Tommy, Episode 3) give us insight into her feelings in the moment. These exclamatory sentences and fragments ("Stop it!" "I can't believe it!" "Absolutely not!") are frequent in Simone's dialogue, underlining her emotional expressiveness. In one scene, when her daughter Amy un-invites Karl from the wedding over his scandal, Simone erupts, "My daughter is a monster!" (Episode 9). The strong noun and exclamation show Simone's temper flaring without filter. Such outbursts are a far cry from anything Beth Ann would say. They illustrate that Simone's femininity in the 1980s allows for more open anger and assertion.

In summary, Simone's discourse balances performative femininity with open assertiveness. She does use some of Lakoff's (1975) "female" linguistic features – the lavish adjectives (wonderful, adorable), the polite phrases and occasional tag – but she uses them as tools of charm or sarcasm rather than out of timidity. Simone's relatively low use of hedges and her willingness to swear when needed mark a departure from the purely "ladylike" discourse of the previous generation. She demonstrates how a woman with social confidence can manipulate polite discourse ("Isn't that nice?") to actually dominate a conversation, or drop the niceties entirely to make a point ("Absolutely not." / "What the hell?!"). Her discourse reflects the cultural shifts of the 1980s: greater acceptance of women's assertiveness, but also the expectation that a woman like Simone maintain an image of polished elegance. Therefore, Simone switches registers skillfully – coquettish and refined in one moment, blunt and furious the next –

depending on what suits her interests. This adaptability in her discourse highlights Fairclough's (1995) notion that textual features are linked to context and power: Simone chooses a softer or harsher wording based on who she's talking to and what she aims to achieve, showing her awareness of discourse as social action. Through Simone, a transitional stage of women's discourse is shown – neither as constrained as Beth Ann's nor as unfiltered as Taylor's, but a mix of decorum and defiance.

4.3 Direct and Unfiltered 2010s Discourse

Taylor's discourse is direct, unfiltered, and modern. She speaks her mind with little regard for traditionally "feminine" softening – freely using slang and profanity. However, she will hedge or soften slightly in vulnerable moments. Her style is assertive and colloquial, fitting her role as a contemporary career woman who values honesty and equality in her relationships.

Figure 3 Taylor's Word Cloud

The word cloud generated from Taylor's dialogue highlights her straightforward, casual, and assertive style. Frequently used words such as "gonna," "yeah," "fuck," "right," "look," "house," and interjections like "oh" and "well" reflect a modern, informal, and candid mode of discourse, distinctly contrasting with Beth Ann's reserved politeness and Simone's flamboyant social confidence.

Taylor's discourse prominently features strong expletives such as "fuck" and "shit," indicating a departure from traditional female discourse norms outlined by Lakoff (1975), who suggested women typically avoid strong swear words to uphold social decorum. Instead, Taylor embraces assertive, bold expressions, marking her discourse as reflective of contemporary, egalitarian values.

Additionally, Taylor frequently uses colloquial terms ("yeah," "gonna") and direct imperatives ("stop," "look"), underscoring her frank and decisive manner of communicating. Unlike the emotionally polite hedging observed in Beth Ann or the dramatized interjections characteristic of Simone, Taylor's conversational style appears more direct and less mitigated.

Overall, Taylor's linguistic profile mirrors her character's modern independence and candid personality, offering insights into evolving linguistic representations of female identities over time. The detailed quantitative and qualitative examination of her lexical and syntactic features, presented in the following sections, will further illustrate how Taylor's discourse signifies broader changes in societal attitudes toward femininity and power dynamics, framed within Fairclough's text analysis approach.

Feature	Examples / Count	Notes
Intensifiers	so (8), really (8), absolutely (5), very (3), fucking (1)	Frequently used, e.g., "I really want to dance", "It was absolutely... wow". Uses intensifiers in a casual tone.
Color Terms	None	No specific color terms observed; descriptions focus more on actions rather than visual details.
Extravagant Adjectives	(None of the words in the category) – uses beautiful and cute occasionally, but does not use lovely or gorgeous	Prefers straightforward praise, such as "She's beautiful, too," avoiding overly flowery adjectives.
Expletives	Mild: damn (1, "goddamn"), Strong: shit (6), fuck (10), e.g., "Oh, shit", "Fuck you", "Holy shit", "Fuck it"	Frequent use of strong profanity, particularly "fuck" and "shit," indicating a blunt, expressive discourse style.
Interjections	Moderate use of "Oh (30)", several instances of "Oh my God", some "Wow", used Ugh, used Oof, none of Gosh	Modern and often sarcastic: "Oh, wow" to express impressed sarcasm, "Ugh" to show disgust. Taylor often bypasses polite interjections in favor of direct, casual discourse.

Table 5 Taylor's Lexical Features

Starting with lexical features, Taylor uses intensifiers, but often these come attached to her use of profanity or extreme descriptors. She does use words like "so" and "really," but not to gingerly seek approval – rather, she uses them to stress her point or convey frustration. In a heated monologue in Episode 3, Taylor pours out her stress to her husband Eli: "My life is so hard! The hours I work, the cases I take. And then I come home to this house. This big, fucking house that we can't afford!". In this emotional outburst, Taylor stacking intensifiers: "so hard" to emphasize the difficulty of her life, and the expletive "fucking" as an intensifier for the house (not just "big house" but "big, fucking house," meaning extremely big and burdensome). This kind of discourse – using a curse word as an intensifying adjective – is traditionally associated with male discourse and certainly outside Lakoff's (1975) list of approved "female" intensifiers. Taylor here does exactly what Lakoff said women don't do: she uses a strong swear word where Beth Ann might have said "very." Yet the effect is powerful and authentic; it conveys Taylor's exhaustion and anger vividly. The inclusion of profanity as part of Taylor's intensification strategy indicates that by 2019 (and for this character in particular), the taboo against women swearing has weakened. Taylor doesn't hesitate to say "fuck" to make a point – in fact, she even uses masculine metaphors. In Episode 1, facing a defiant contractor, Taylor asserts authority with a shocking quip: "...as long as you work for me and expect to get paid… my dick is bigger than yours. Am I speaking your language now?". This line is loaded: she uses a crude male reference ("my dick") as a metaphorical intensifier of her dominance. It's deliberately jarring and humorous, but it demonstrates Taylor's comfort with aggressive discourse. By bluntly co-opting a phrase a cocky man might use, Taylor challenges the contractor on his own turf. This quote encapsulates how Taylor's lexicon often subverts gender expectations – she meets men as an equal or superior, even if it means using their locker-room lingo. Taylor does this consciously, and her success in shutting down the contractor shows the strategy working.

Taylor's everyday vocabulary is generally straightforward and colloquial. She does not adorn her discourse with many polite euphemisms or extra adjectives. For example, when she's annoyed or giving orders, she's concise: "I want your wallet. And your phone. You are cut off." (Episode 7) – a series of simple, forceful sentences. She doesn't say "Could you please give me…"; she issues commands. Also, unlike Beth Ann or Simone, Taylor seldom uses overtly "sweet" adjectives like lovely or adorable. If she compliments or describes someone, she tends to use plain adjectives or more substantive descriptions. One rare instance of a term of endearment is when she affectionately says to her sick husband, "Oh, sweetie, you still have that cold?" (Episode 10). Here "sweetie" is a gentle, traditionally feminine word – showing Taylor can be tender – but notably she follows it up with pragmatic talk about doctors and trust. In fact, that scene quickly shifts to her taking decisive action again. Overall, Taylor's use of such endearments or empty adjectives is minimal; she is more likely to use technical or strong words (e.g., calling out "bullshit" if she hears an excuse, or saying someone is "crazy" rather than "silly").

Precise color terms are entirely absent from Taylor's discourse in the whole season, which is not surprising – her storylines revolve around relationships and personal conflict, not descriptions of objects. If anything, she uses abstract or intensity adjectives (e.g., she says her husband's relapse put her through "hell," which, though a noun, serves as a strong descriptor of her experience). In short, Taylor's lexical choices point to efficiency and intensity; she selects words that assert facts or feelings bluntly, and she does not pad her discourse with niceties.

A hallmark of Taylor's discourse is her frequent use of profanity and slang, more so than either Beth Ann or Simone. It has been seen that how Taylor uses "fuck" in a metaphor and as an intensifier. She also uses words like "shit" and "dick" without hesitation.

For instance, when she wants to show the utterly joy when her houseguest is out of the picture, she uses a coarse retort like "Fuck it. Let's just buy a field. We can pitch a tent" (Episode 10) or when she's exasperated with both her husband and their houseguest, she exclaims "I can't deal with this shit right now!" (Episode 4). Such usage reflects that Taylor doesn't tone herself down for others' comfort – a very un-"ladylike" but empowered stance. Even her casual interjections skew traditionally masculine; in Episode 10, when Eli impulsively wants to buy a house, Taylor incredulously says, "Dude, are you crazy?". Addressing her husband as "dude" is a humorous touch that shows her generational slang (it's a friendly, if cheeky, way to call him out) and again signals equality – she's speaking to him almost as a buddy would, not in a deferential wife-to-husband tone. Lakoff's (1975) framework would classify much of Taylor's salty discourse as violating the norms of women's discourse of earlier decades. Indeed, by Lakoff's criteria, Taylor often talks more like the stereotypical male: using cuss words, direct commands, and confident assertions without mitigation. This highlights how far societal expectations have evolved by 2019, especially for a character like Taylor who explicitly rejects subservient gender roles.

Feature	Examples / Count	Notes
Hedges	I think (12), maybe (2), I guess (1)	Uses hedges when being careful: "I think we should..." to soften directives, "Maybe we could..." when suggesting significant changes. Generally more direct than overly hedged.
Tag Questions	..., don't you think? (1), ..., right? (implied in tone)	Not common, but occasionally used for coaxing agreement ("Don't you think?"). Mostly prefers direct questions or statements without tags.
Exclamatory Sentences	None in "What a..." / "How..." forms – instead, uses expletives or strong tone.	Avoids traditional exclamatory structures. Expresses excitement with "That's amazing!" or anger with "How could you?" (genuine question) or simply "Fuck!".

Table 6 Taylor's Syntactical Features

Syntactically, Taylor's discourse is characterized by direct statements, imperatives, and few hedges or questions. She typically does not hedge her statements; instead of saying "I think…," "we should…," "maybe…" she will say "We should do ..." When disagreement arises, Taylor states her stance unequivocally. For example, when arguing with her houseguest about lifestyle changes in Episode 8, she says, "I think that a part of him always resented me for managing the situation in a way that he couldn't.". This sentence, while complex, contains the phrase "I think" – which could be seen as a hedge – but in context Taylor is not using it to soften her claim; she's articulating a thoughtful perspective on their issues. It's a reflective statement rather than an apologetic one. In fact, much of Taylor's longer sentences come during emotional vulnerability, not uncertainty. When she's not in an emotional monologue, her sentences are often clipped and authoritative, as mentioned earlier (e.g., "You are cut off. No cash, no cards, no PayPal, no Venmo" – Episode 7). She also frequently uses parallel structures and lists for emphasis, which convey firmness. The lack of hedging is also evident in how she handles others' objections. In Episode 1, when the contractor Saul resists her instructions, Taylor doesn't say "I'd appreciate it if you could possibly…"; she flatly asserts her knowledge of contracts and delivers the famous "my dick is bigger" line. There is zero hedging – it's confrontation head-on. This direct style can be linked to her confidence in her professional identity.

Taylor almost never uses tag questions or rising intonation to seek approval. If she asks a question, it's because she genuinely needs an answer or is challenging someone, not because she is unsure of her own statement. For example, she might ask her husband, "What, you don't like that idea?" (Episode 10), but this question is almost rhetorical – it's pushing him to explain himself. It's certainly not the tentative "It's good, isn't it?" It can be heard from Beth Ann. In fact, sometimes Taylor will answer her own question or cut off the response, showing she wasn't really looking for validation. This illustrates a key difference: Taylor uses questions to interrogate or make points, not to soften statements. Notably, as her marriage storyline resolves, Taylor does show a gentler side – she proposes to temporarily close their open marriage by saying, "I thought maybe we could rethink the whole open marriage thing." (Episode 10). Here "maybe" appears, but given the context (an emotionally laden reconciliation), it serves to gently introduce a big request (monogamy) rather than to display personal uncertainty. Taylor is actually quite certain of what she wants – to focus on her marriage – but adds "maybe" to ease her husband into the idea since it represents a change of heart for her. Thus, when Taylor hedges, it is out of consideration for her partner's feelings, not due to lack of confidence. This further underscores that her default mode is confident and unhedged.

Taylor's exclamations are often tied to anger or decisive moments. She doesn't frequently squeal in joy or gasp in fear; instead, her exclamatory lines are commands or expressions of frustration. For instance, when she hits a breaking point with Eli's relapse and their houseguest's manipulation, she yells, "Enough! I'm done!" (Episode 8). Also, when making a sudden decision, she might exclaim "Fuck it." (as in Episode 10 when deciding to sell the house – "Fuck it. Let's just buy a field and pitch a tent." said half-jokingly). Taylor's exclamations thus tend to either cut off an escalating situation or commit to a course of action with finality. It

is seldom to hear her use the classic exclamatory form "How [adjective]…" or "What a [noun]!" – those belong more to Beth Ann's lexicon. Instead, her emotional peaks are marked by frank outbursts, like the cathartic rant in Episode 3 that included multiple expletives and ended in tears

It's worth noting that because Taylor's baseline is very direct, an outburst from her is perceived as authentic raw emotion rather than just part of her everyday demeanor. This is evident when she breaks down crying while yelling about the "big, fucking house" – it's a moment of vulnerability where her controlled facade cracks. In contrast, when Beth Ann raises her voice slightly, it already seems dramatic relative to her norm. Taylor's baseline assertiveness means she must escalate to actual shouting and profanity to signal that she's truly at wit's end, which she does. From a discourse perspective, Taylor's willingness to be loud and even unrefined when necessary demonstrates that she does not accept the constraint that a woman must always "talk nice." Her discourse enacts the equality she believes in; she talks to her husband, friends, and adversaries in the same straightforward way a man in her position might, without self-censorship for politeness's sake.

To sum up, Taylor's linguistic profile is one of confident, unapologetic assertiveness, tempered by moments of emotional openness. She uses far fewer of Lakoff's (1975) "women's language" features – hardly any hedges or tags, no euphemistic substitutions for four-letter words – and instead often uses what Lakoff would term "strong" language. In doing so, Taylor claims the same linguistic freedom long enjoyed by men to express anger, dominance, or humor in blunt terms. This does not mean Taylor is perpetually harsh; it means she chooses when to be gentle and when to be blunt based on her own aims, not due to an imposed social script of femininity. For instance, she can tenderly say "sweetie" in one breath and "fuck it" in the next if the situation calls for it. Her discourse reflects the balancing act of a modern woman who is at once a loving spouse and a fiercely independent individual. Through Taylor, it can be seen that how power relations are negotiated in discourse: she refuses to cede power by sugar-coating her words, and as a result, her interactions (with contractors, with her polyamorous houseguest, even with her husband initially) often position her as the one in control. Fairclough's idea that text is shaped by and shapes social structures is exemplified here – Taylor's no-nonsense talk both arises from her status as an equal partner and helps reinforce that status in her interactions (Thornton & Reynolds, 2006). When Eli at one point challenges her on a decision, she doesn't back down linguistically or otherwise, which in turn leads him to accept her authority.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Implications

This study set out to explore the development of women's discourse by analyzing the language features of three female protagonists from *Why Women Kill*, each situated in a different historical decade (1960s, 1980s, 2010s). Using Lakoff's (1975) framework of women's language as the analytical lens, this study examined how linguistic features such as hedges, tag questions, intensifiers, polite forms, and expletive usage manifested in the speech of Beth Ann, Simone, and Taylor, and what this reveals about changing gender norms. The analysis, supported by corpus linguistic tools (AntConc) and qualitative context evaluation, yields several insights into the evolution of female discourse:

In the 1960s, represented by Beth Ann, women's language closely aligned with Lakoff's classic description. Beth Ann's speech was heavily marked by deference and tentativeness: she hedged her statements, frequently used tag questions to seek approval, deployed many intensifiers and "empty" adjectives to display enthusiasm or soften opinions, and was unfailingly polite and euphemistic. She avoided strong language entirely. This linguistic profile reflects the social reality of the time – women were expected to be passive, agreeable, and ladylike – and Beth Ann's submissive communication style both signals and reinforces her lack of power in her relationships. The language data thus corroborate Lakoff's claim that the gender norms of that era were encoded in everyday speech.

In the 1980s, represented by Simone, women's language showed signs of change. Simone's discourse retained an aura of feminine elegance and politeness, yet she exhibited a noticeable increase in assertiveness and control in how she spoke. Traditional features were present (she could pour on the endearments and maintain a charming tone), but she used them more strategically. Simone rarely hedged when it came to important matters; she spoke her mind and only feigned uncertainty or humility for effect. She used tag questions not out of need for validation, but often sarcastically or rhetorically to make a point. Intensifiers and glamorous adjectives peppered her speech, reflecting socialite femininity, but she also wasn't afraid to drop the polite facade and issue direct commands when provoked (e.g., "I want you gone by morning."). She mostly avoided crude language, yet her willingness to occasionally use a mild swear word indicated a loosening taboo. Overall, Simone's language straddled the line between upholding ladylike norms and breaking them – mirroring the transitional nature of the 1980s, when women's public roles were expanding but traditional expectations had not fully disappeared. Simone's case illustrates that the *function* of certain linguistic features can shift with context: the same tag question or intensive adjective can be used not to diminish one's voice, but to wield influence or convey sarcasm, depending on the speaker's intent and social standing.

In the 2010s, represented by Taylor, women's language (at least as depicted for this character) had transformed to be largely indistinguishable from men's language in similar contexts. Taylor's speech was assertive, succinct, and unrestrained. She employed few hedges or indirectness markers, opting instead for clarity and direct commands or statements. She did not use tag questions to seek reassurance; if anything, she occasionally used them to reinforce a decision after the fact. Intensifiers were used sparingly and often sarcastically rather than to appease. Politeness was not a default in her interactions—while she could be polite, she did not shy from disagreement or bluntness for fear of seeming unfeminine. Most notably, Taylor freely used strong profanity when expressing anger or emphasis, a behavior that would have been unthinkable (on screen or off) for a woman in the 1960s. This represents a significant shift in what is socially permissible for female speech. Taylor's linguistic behavior underscores the idea that by the 21st century, many women (especially in empowered positions) feel less pressure to conform to a "nice girl" speaking style and instead prioritize effectiveness and honesty in communication. Her discourse validates the view that as women gain power in society, the so-called "powerless" language diminishes—supporting O'Barr and Atkins' (1980) hypothesis about these speech features being tied to power dynamics rather than inherent gender traits.

Taken together, the three characters' language profiles provide a vivid narrative of sociolinguistic change. Over roughly fifty years, the portrayal of women's speech in *Why Women Kill* progresses from ultra-polite and deferential to confident and unfiltered. This can be interpreted as a reflection (and dramatization) of real-world trends: the feminist movements and broader cultural changes have gradually redefined what is acceptable or expected from women's communication. Traits once seen as unbecoming for a woman (such as open assertiveness or swearing) have become, if not completely normalized, far more common and acceptable. Conversely, behaviors that were once mandatory (constant politeness, deference, softening one's opinions) are no longer a default or necessary for many women, particularly those in peer relationships with men.

The findings underscore the importance of context in discussions of language and gender. Lakoff's theory was context-specific (early 1970s America) and as this study shows, those linguistic norms do not remain static. Women's language features evolve as the power and social roles of women evolve. Therefore, when analyzing gendered communication, one must consider temporal and social context: what might be a marker of submissiveness in one era could be absent or carry a different meaning in another. For scholars and students of linguistics, this highlights that "women's language" is not a monolith, but a moving target influenced by cultural norms, media representations, and individual agency. It also suggests that media, like television, both reflects and potentially shapes these norms by showing audiences new ways women can speak and be perceived. A character like Taylor can serve as a cultural model that women need not conform to antiquated speech patterns to be respected or likable.

5.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research focused on scripted dialogue from a single television series, which while rich, has its constraints. The characters are deliberately written to exemplify certain archetypes, so their speech may exaggerate features for narrative effect. Real-life language use is more fluid and varied; not all women of the 1960s spoke exactly like Beth Ann, nor do all 2010s women speak like Taylor. Furthermore, the analysis is in part qualitative and interpretive – another researcher might categorize or emphasize features differently. This study also limited our scope to Lakoff's framework, excluding other potentially relevant aspects (e.g., vocal tone, conversation strategies beyond the lexical/syntactic features, or intersectional factors like how race or class might intersect with gender in language – though class was touched upon with Simone). Thus, while the study offers insights into patterns of change, it should not be over-generalized without caution.

Further studies could extend this line of inquiry by examining a broader range of data, such as comparing multiple shows or movies set in different decades to see if similar linguistic shifts are observable. Investigating real-life data could complement the media analysis and confirm whether the fictional portrayal mirrors actual trends. Additionally, incorporating other frameworks such as politeness theory or discourse analysis focusing on power relations could enrich understanding of why certain features fall in or out of favor as society changes.

In conclusion, through the lens of *Why Women Kill*'s three protagonists, this study sees a clear trajectory in the depiction of women's discourse: from the constrained and "polite" language of the mid-20th century housewife to the bold and forthright language of the 21st-century professional woman. Lakoff's pioneering ideas about women's language find both support and evolution in this comparative context. The women of *Why Women Kill* demonstrate that language is a dynamic social tool – one that women have continually reshaped as their social standing has evolved. The development of female discourse over time is not just a linguistic story, but a story of cultural transformation toward greater gender equality, with language both reflecting and enabling women's changing voice in society.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

[1] Anthony, L. (2019). AntConc (Version 3.5.8) [Computer software]. Waseda University. Available from https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software

[2] Cameron, D. (2007). The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages? Oxford University Press.

[3] Cherry, M. (Creator & Executive Producer). (2019). Why Women Kill [Television series]. Los Angeles, CA: CBS All Access.

[4] Holmes, J. (2006). Gendered Talk at Work: Constructing Gender Identity through Workplace Discourse. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

[5] Lakoff, R. (1975). Language and Woman's Place. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

[6] Mills, S. (2003). Gender and Politeness. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Mills, S. (2003). Gender and politeness (No. 17). Cambridge University Press.

[8] O'Barr, W. M., & Atkins, B. K. (1980). Women's language or powerless language? In McConnell-Ginet, R., Borker, R., & Furman, N. (Eds.), Women and Language in Literature and Society (pp. 93–110). New York, NY: Praeger.

[9] Stapleton, K. (2003). Gender and swearing: A community practice. Women and Language, 26(2), 22.

[10] Svendsen, A. D. (2019). Lakoff and women's language: A critical overview of empirical evidence for Lakoff's thesis. Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English, (4), 45–58.

[11] Why Women Kill – Episode Transcripts (2019). Retrieved from SubsLikeScript website: https://subslikescript.com/series/Why_Women_Kill-9054904 (for dialogue verification purposes).