Language Barriers to Gender Equity in Senior Executive Leadership

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The impact of cultural forces such as language is powerful in understanding the culture of an organization as language operates outside of an individual's general awareness. Understanding how language is used by executive leaders can lend a significant insight into language usage that may promote member integration into the executive culture. This study has conducted a comparative quantitative analysis of the language of women and men executives who have succeeded in the roles as CEOs.

INTRODUCTION

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed progress in women's professional advancement in the United States; the gender wage gap narrowed, sex segregation in most professions greatly declined, and the percentage of women climbing the management ranks steadily grew (Deane, et al., 2014). In 1980, there were zero women in the top executive ranks of Fortune 500 companies; by 2001, women represented 11.0 percent of senior corporate leaders, and from 1997 to 2009, women's share of board seats in S&P 500 companies increased to 7.2 percent (Deane et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, although women today hold almost 52 percent of all professional-level jobs in the United States, they still lag substantially behind American men when it comes to representation in senior leadership positions. Women hold only 25.1 percent of executive/senior-level positions, which includes 4.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs and just 19.9 percent of Fortune 500 board seats (Catalyst, 2016b). Although women comprise nearly 50 percent of the advertising industry workforce, only 11 percent hold positions as creative directors (Ember, 2016). In the financial services industry, the percentages are especially low. Women comprise 54.2 percent of the financial services labor force, but only 12.4 percent are executive officers and none are CEOs (Deane et al., 2014).

The representation of women of color in executive management roles is worse still. Although women of color, which includes Hispanic, African American, and Asian women, comprise 38.0 percent of the nation's female population and 16.5 percent of workers in S&P 500 companies, only 3.9 percent of executive-level managers in S&P companies are women of color. Furthermore, women of color hold only 3.1 percent of the board seats of Fortune 500 companies—a number that exaggerates their actual presence as one quarter of the board members who are women of color serve on multiple boards. As recently as 2013, more than two thirds of Fortune 500 companies had no women of color as members of the board of directors (Warner, 2014). A report by the Center for Talent Innovation found African American women to be more ambitious and interested in power than their White counterparts (Purdie-Vaughns, 2015). Yet, all women continue to be sidetracked into auxiliary and staff functions, such as human resources and administrative

services, rather than into line positions where they would be responsible for an organization's profits and losses.

It is now estimated that, at the current rate of change, it will take until 2085 for women to reach parity with men in leadership roles in the United States (Deane et al., 2014). This slow rate of progress persists even though the business case for gender diversity in senior and executive positions is persuasive from a practical point of view. Studies have shown that companies that have the best records for promoting women outstrip their competition on every measure of profitability (Johns, 2013). The first empirical study in support of gender diversity demonstrated a strong correlation between a company's solid record of promoting women into the executive suite and high profitability (Adler, 1998). This study examined the performance data of 215 Fortune 500 firms over an 18-year period, from 1980 to 1998. Four evaluations of profitability were examined including profits as a percentage of revenues, assets, stockholders' equity, and a firm's competitiveness vis-à-vis its industry median counterpart. The results showed a clear, positive correlation between performance of Fortune 500 firms and number of female executives (Adler, 1998).

Furthermore, a recent study analyzing the effect of diversity on innovation and performance was conducted by the Center for Talent Innovation (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2003). This research was based on a nationally representative survey of 1,800 professionals, 40 case studies, and various focus groups and interviews. The analysis compared diversity in leadership with market outcomes and found that companies with diversity out-innovated and outperformed other companies.

An absence of support for new ideas from diverse contributors has been shown to cost companies decisive market opportunities. For example, Hewlett et al. (2003) found that leaders who acknowledge diverse views are nearly twice as likely as others to produce value-driven insights and 3.5 times as likely to contribute to their innovative potential. With the overwhelming evidence for the benefits of diversity in the workplace, it is clear that it is vital for organizations to achieve a more diverse executive leadership. Yet, despite these research findings, there continues to be a lack of willingness in organizations to promote women into leadership positions.

The government has attempted to address the issue of gender inequity in the workplace through legislative actions. Equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws have been passed (and continue to be amended) to prohibit gender and racial discrimination. In the United States, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1963 prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, or national origin in any employment condition, including hiring, firing, promotion, transfer, compensation, and access to training programs (Powell, 2011). Still, women continue to face a glass ceiling at the senior executive level (Catalyst, 2016a).

Why So Few Women in Executive Leadership Positions?

Numerous explanations have been offered for why there are so few women in executive leadership positions. For example, studies have shown that a lack of women in senior positions may suggest to women in lower levels of the organization that obtaining an upper management position is not possible. Therefore, qualified and experienced women may not apply for upper management positions, and as a result, organizations lose the opportunity to capitalize on all the skills and talents of their workforce (Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011).

Another explanation for a lack of women in senior leadership roles has focused on the idea that there is a lack of qualified women in the pipeline. Nevertheless, since 1980, more women than men have enrolled in institutions of higher education and have been outperforming their male counterparts. For example, in the United States, men constitute only 42 percent of college students. In 2013, 25–34-year-old women were 21 percent more likely than men to be college graduates and 48 percent more likely to have completed graduate school (Council of Economic Advisors, 2013). Additionally, women receive a greater number of the honors degrees at many universities. For example, 55 percent of the women in the Harvard University class of 2006 graduated with honors, whereas barely half of the men did so. In 2009, again 55 percent of women were awarded honors degrees at Harvard compared with 51 percent of men (Hsu, 2011). These studies suggest that pipeline issues are not the problem.

The lack of female representation in senior leadership roles has also been attributed to a perceived lack of leadership traits and lack of motivation of women in management (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). Yet, research has shown that most Americans believe that women are just as capable in their ability to control a corporate boardroom and to be political leaders as their male counterparts (Deane et al., 2014). Furthermore, based on a survey of nearly 2,000 randomly selected adults conducted online in November 2014, most Americans now consider women indistinguishable from men in leadership traits such as intelligence and innovation. In fact, many respondents in the survey believed women to be more compassionate and well organized as leaders (Deane et al., 2014).

Another consideration for the shortage of women in senior leadership positions has been the traditional view of a woman's role in the family (Driscoll & Goldberg, 1993). Nonetheless, again studies have shown that the general public's perception of the role of women in the family has changed to accommodate a working schedule (Deane et al., 2014). Even though research surveys (Deane et al., 2014) in the past found it more difficult for women to advance in their careers and to compete for top executive jobs as a result of career interruptions related to motherhood and the family, work–life balance for women was not considered a key barrier in a recent Pew Research Center survey (Deane et al., 2014). Only one in five surveyed said that a woman's family responsibility was the major reason she did not attain a top leadership position in business, and in fact, mothers and fathers were more likely than childless adults to say they want to be promoted to top executive positions (McKinsey, 2015).

THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP

If women are both ready and able to assume senior leadership positions in an organization, what is holding them back? In this chapter, we suggest that, as Eccles and Nohria (1992) have noted, "Communication is the real work of leadership" (as quoted in Blagg & Young, 2001, para. 5), and for women to be successful as senior executives, they must learn the *language of leadership*. In this study, we analyzed the language of successful female executives who had broken through the "glass ceiling" and compared their use of language with the language usage of women in the general population to address the following research questions: How is the language usage of successful female executives different from the language usage of women in the general population? Is there a "Language of Leadership?"

Language and Leadership

In today's organizations, clear communication and collaboration is an essential ingredient for an organization's survival and success. Creative collaborations in the workplace typically yield better solutions to complex problems than does the sole effort of an individual (Elsbach & Flynn, 2015). Research has suggested that this contemporary view of collaborative leadership is consistent with the way women have traditionally engaged in the workplace (Baxter, 2012; Book, 2000; Helgesen, 1990; Rosener, 1990). Women's leadership style tends to be more collaborative and empowering of team members, whereas men's leadership style tends to be more hierarchical and command-and-control oriented (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). This type of collaborative leadership style manifested by women is making inroads in breaking down the old-boy network of America's corporate value system (Elmuti et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, for collaborative approaches to be adopted in the workplace, concepts and plans must first be effectively communicated to followers and colleagues. Communication enables the understanding and the trust necessary to encourage others to follow a leader (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Sharbrough, 2015). By communicating effectively with their team, leaders improve their ability to get things done.

Language usage as a catalyst for improving communication in a company culture is frequently overlooked by organizations. Organizational culture is reinforced through language and is intricately interwoven in expressing the norms and standards of behavior in the culture (Schein, 2010). Schein described the use of language as a means for implementing a shared vision of the organization's customs and traditions. Thus, clear communication is at the heart of any successful organization. If the leaders of an organization cannot communicate clearly, it will be impossible for the group to build, as well as to solve problems and accomplish tasks (2010).

Every organization has a unique culture (Schein, 2010), and the executive culture is no exception. The way individuals use language is not just to transfer ideas but also to negotiate the type of relationship desired by the conversational partners (Pinker, 2007). Language is the most common and reliable way for people to translate their internal thoughts and emotions into a form that others can understand in social relationships. Language can be considered part of the mental architecture used to represent cultural experiences. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis holds that a language's grammar orients speakers to certain aspects of experience and shapes the way they mentally represent that experience (Whorf, 1956).

Therefore, words and language are the medium that can reveal human behavior (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Much of the work on the sociology of language has established conclusively that perceived language variation produces evaluative judgments about the speaker (Strand, 1999). Language is a powerful tool in understanding the culture of an organization and its members because language is a cultural force that tends to operate outside of general awareness (Schein, 2010).

Gender Differences and Language Usage

A review of the literature on gender linguistic differences in the general population has been provided in previous publications (e.g., Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001; Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008); therefore, what follows is a summary of the key findings. Gendered language refers to words and syntax used differently by men and women, and early research (e.g., Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990) has shown that men and women use language in different ways. For example, Lakoff's (1975) pioneering work studied types of phrases that were more commonly used by women than by men: hedges (e.g., "it seems likely") and tag questions (e.g., "… aren't you?"). Lakoff proposed that a "women's language" exists that girls adopt through socialization. Research by Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, and Gibson (1988) has suggested that women tend to use more questions in verbal exchanges (e.g., "shall we go to the store?"), whereas men tend to use more directives (e.g., "let's go to the store"). In terms of word usage, McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, and Gale (1977) found that women use more adverbs and conjunctions and their sentences tend to be longer, whereas men tend to use longer words and more swear words (Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003; Mulac & Lundell, 1986). Men also tend to use more articles ("the," "an," and "a"), whereas women tend to use more personal pronouns (Mulac & Lundell, 1986). Also, women tend to use more negative emotion words (Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003).

Recent studies have suggested that by counting and categorizing word usage, much can be learned about a person's underlying thoughts, emotions, and motivations. For example, as Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker (2008) noted, "Using more pronouns in general (rather than nouns) refers to a shared reality, in that both parties have to understand who 'he' is" (p. 216). Furthermore, Pennebaker et al. (as cited in Newman et al., 2008) found that the use of first-person singular has been associated with a self-focus, whereas the use of first-person plural is generally associated with more of a group identity.

In this study, we use text analysis software to analyze interviews with senior executive women and to compare the language usage of these executives with the language usage of women in the general population. Recent studies have shown that common words used in everyday speech and written documents—words that include pronouns, articles, and prepositions—tend to reflect the personality traits and behavioral tendencies of the speaker or writer (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). These *function words* reveal the writer's personality and personal characteristics, thinking style, emotional state, and connections with others (Pennebaker, 2011). Although function words account for less than one tenth of 1 percent of the vocabulary of the speaker, they can comprise nearly 60 percent of the words used by the speaker (Pennebaker, 2011). This deceptively small percentage accounts for more than half of the words we use in daily speech (Rochon, Saffran, Berndt, & Schwartz, 2000).

Furthermore, the brain is not wired to notice the use of these function words as one would notice descriptive and action words. The function words, therefore, tend to be invisible to the listener and to the speaker because both will naturally focus on the speaker's content words (Pennebaker, 2011). Nevertheless, Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010) found that the function words we use in daily life reflect what we are paying attention to, what we are thinking about, what we are trying to avoid, how we are feeling, and how we are organizing and analyzing our world. Studies have suggested that by counting and

categorizing function words, as well as content nouns and verbs, certain psychological attributes can be learned about a person's underlying thoughts, emotions, and motivations (Newman et al., 2008).

RESEARCH STUDY

A random sampling of interviews with female senior executives (n = 100) was selected from the *Corner Office* column of reporter Adam Bryant of *The New York Times* (Bryant, n.d.). These interviews are a weekly feature in the Business Section of the Sunday edition and were conducted between March 2009 and April 2015. The women interviewed included top executives from a wide range of companies—large and small and for-profit, not-for-profit, and educational. In the interviews, Bryant asked the participants how they learned to lead, the mistakes they made along the way, how they fostered supportive corporative cultures, and how they interviewed job candidates, run meetings, promoted teamwork, managed their time, and handled feedback (Bryant, n.d.). The data for language usage of women in the general population were supplied from the study by Newman et al. (2008). This study contains an analysis of 14,000 text samples that covered a wide range of topics.

Study Methodology

The Bryant interviews were analyzed in a three-step process. In step one, after eliminating all the words in each interview from the interviewer, the 100 selected executive women's interviews were converted into plain text files and processed using the computerized text analysis program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007). The LIWC program is composed of two main features—the word dictionaries and the processing component. The word dictionaries are the centerpiece of the software and are collections of words that define a particular category of word. For example, the category "articles" is composed of three words: *the*, *an*, and *a*; the category "first person plural" contains three words: *us, our*, and *we*. The second feature, the processing feature, opens selected plain text files. These plain text files can be any text: student essays, poems, or leadership interviews. The software analyzes each text file, word by word, and assigns each word to a particular word category. After reviewing every word in the text file, the LIWC software calculates the percentage of word usage for each LIWC category—for example, an essay might have 3.33 percent of the words in the "third person singular" category or 5.45 percent of the words in the "article" category that includes words like *the*, *an*, and *a*. Except for the "total word count" and "words per sentence," all categories of words are expressed as a percentage of total use in any given text file.

In step two of the analysis, the means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the LIWC word categories from the interviews with the senior female leaders (n = 100). These data were compared with the means and standard deviations for the word usage of women in the general population as identified in the Newman et al. study (2008), which had been calculated using the same LIWC software. In both studies, there were a total of 42 word categories. In step three, Cohen's d effect size differences were calculated that compared the means and standard deviations of the words used by the executive women's population with those of the women in the general population.

Results

Table 1 illustrates the differences between specific word usages of women in the general population compared with that of women in the executive population in terms of effect size as measured by Cohen's d value. The effect size analysis compares the mean of the experimental group (in this case, the language of executive women) with the mean of the control group (the language of women in the general population). Effect size is defined as the magnitude, or size, of the difference between specific word usages of each of these two groups. In using the LIWC software, 42 word categories analyzed in the Newman study (2008) of the language usage of women in the general population were compared with the same 42 word categories in this study's analysis of the language usage of executive women. Table 1 summarizes the findings of this study.

TABLE 1
EXECUTIVE WOMEN COMPARED WITH WOMEN IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

Executive women used significantly **more words** from these word categories than did women in the general population:	Executive women used significantly **fewer words** from these word categories than did women in the general population:
Causation Insight Social Words Pronoun Second Person Pronoun Space Motion Occupation Money Positive Emotions Tentative	Negative Emotions Friends Home Inclusion Words Sadness Anger Family Third Person Pronoun Metaphysics

DISCUSSION

Is there a language of leadership that must be learned by senior women executives that differs from the language used by women in the general population? Using LIWC text analysis software, this study found significant differences in language usage between female executives and women in the general population that suggests there may be such a language. For example, executive women used a significantly larger number of pronouns than did women in the general population. The pronoun is the most commonly used word category of all the function words and accounts for approximately 14 percent of all spoken and written words (Pennebaker et al., 2007). Pronouns are considered social words because they refer to people and require a shared reference between the speaker and the listener—both the speaker and the listener must know who *he, she*, or *they* are (Pennebaker, 2011). Furthermore, as Pennebaker (2011) noted, a greater use of pronouns tends to define a *dynamic thinker*. Dynamic thinkers tend to "devote much of their thinking to other people (which explains their high use of pronouns)" (p. 285). For a leader to use social words makes sense because a leader's prime responsibility is to communicate with and motivate others in her organization. In addition to pronouns, this study found that female executives used more words falling under the general category *social words* that include, for example, words like *helping, asking*, and *sharing,* which further supports this notion that female executives tend to be dynamic thinkers (Pennebaker, 2011).

Female executives also used the second-person pronoun, *you*, significantly more often than did women in the general population. Studies have shown that the second-person pronoun is often used in giving directions and orders. Furthermore, in written and spoken conversation, research has shown that the person who used more second-person pronouns was likely to be a person higher in status (Pennebaker, 2011).

Categories of words used more frequently by women in the general population compared with those of executive women include words related to negative emotions, including sadness and anger, and words denoting friends, family, and the home. Learning the language of leadership is one explanation for this difference in word usage. To avoid the traditional female *role traps* described by Kanter (1993), women in the executive population seem to have learned to minimize the usage of words connoting negative emotions, sadness, friends, family, and the home. Furthermore, female executives demonstrated a greater use of positive emotion words and less use of negative emotion words than did their counterparts in the general population. Research (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016) has suggested that positive people tend to do better in the workplace. In addition, better customer service and better overall quality of work were consistently associated with positive emotions—and these findings have been found to hold across roles and industries (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016). Conversely, negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear tend to lead to negative outcomes, including poor performance and high turnover—all behaviors that leaders attempt to minimize in their organizations.

This study also found a greater use of words related to occupation and money by female executives compared to women in the general population. This type of word usage can be said to reflect an executive culture that traditionally has placed a strong focus on the financials that drive a business. Since a significant part of senior manager's attention must be devoted to the organization and to the finances that support its success, these word categories indicate a cultural norm of language in the executive suite.

As further support for the concept of a language of leadership, see Table 2.

TABLE 2
EXECUTIVE MEN COMPARED WITH MEN IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

Executive men used significantly **more words** from these word categories than did men in the general population:	Executive men used significantly **fewer words** from these word categories than did men in the general population:
Causation Insight Social Words Pronoun Second Person Pronoun Space Motion Occupation Money Positive Emotions Tentative Certainty	Negative Emotions Friends Home Inclusion Words Sadness Anger Family Third Person Pronoun Metaphysics

Table 2 illustrates the differences between word usage categories of men in the general population compared with those of executive men (n = 100). It is significant to note that the word categories where men executives differed from men in the general population were the same as the word categories where female executives differed from women in the general population with one exception. Executive men used more certainty words than did executive women.

Tables 1 and 2 suggest that there is a language of leadership that both men and women learn in order to assume senior leadership positions. As Burris, Rodger, Mannix, Hendron, and Oldroyd's (2009) have noted, "people's language changes once they adopt a role" (as cited in Pennebaker, 2011, p. 190) and that "most people if thrust into a high-status leadership position will likely start to talk like a leader" (p. 191). However, this study also suggests that learning the language of leadership may be more challenging for women than for men, perhaps due to role traps (Kanter, 1993) and to social conditioning (Lakoff, 1975).

Table 3 illustrates key differences in word usage for the same 42 word categories for executive men and women compared with men and women in the general population as found in the Newman et al. (2008) study. Specifically, as shown in Table 3A, both men and women executives and men in the general population, use words that connote money, occupation, and the directive second person pronoun significantly more often than women in the general population. Furthermore, as shown in Table 3B, both men and women executives and men in the general population, have been found to use significantly fewer words than women in the general population that connote; negative emotions, friends, the home, sadness, the family, and third person pronouns. These results suggest that these words are common to both the use of language for men in the general population and both men and women executives but are different from the language of women in the general population and therefore must be learned and acquired by women who attain executive roles.

TABLE 3

A

Women and men executives, and men in the general population, used significantly **more words** from these word categories than did women in the general population:
Money Occupation Second Person Pronoun

B

Women and men executives, and men in the general population, used significantly **fewer words** from these word categories than did women in the general population:
Negative Emotions Friends Home Inclusion Words Sadness Anger Family Third Person Pronouns Metaphysical

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory (CAT; Giles & Gasiorek, 2013) offers a potential theoretical explanation for the concept of a language of leadership. CAT is based on the proposition that communication mediates and maintains interpersonal and intergroup relationships (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005). CAT suggests that a speaker adjusts his or her language usage to fit the context of a particular situation (Giles & Gasiorek, 2013), and this ability to adjust the use of language to fit the context is fundamental for a successful linguistic interaction. The results from this study suggest that senior female leaders have adopted the language of leadership to (a) reinforce their leadership position and (b) improve their communication skills to facilitate optimal communication for effective subordinate participation in the organizational culture.

Words do matter, and as research by Malloy and Janowski (1992) has shown, in addition to behavioral differences, subordinate perceptions of leadership are strongly based on the quality of spoken ideas and speeches. As Pennebaker has noted, "Make a potential leader more attentive to their words and the meaning of their words and they can change their relationship with others and become better leaders" (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 194). Learning the language of leadership for women may be more complex than men due to conventions of gender socialization. The findings from this study suggest that women who break the glass ceiling and enter the senior executive ranks do use language in different ways from nonexecutive women and in fact have made more significant changes in their use of language than do men. The potential for language to serve as a catalyst for improving access to a company's leadership culture is often a missed opportunity for organizations to improve their leadership diversity. This study suggests an understanding of the language of leadership can help to minimize the communication barriers posed by language and may increase the opportunities for women to attain executive leadership positions.

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