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Sex-Linked Differences in Letters of Recommendation

Watson, Carol. **Women and Language** 10.2 (Mar 31, 1987): 26.



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Sex-Linked Differences in Letters of Recommendation

(Summary of a study conducted for a graduate seminar in Anthropological Linguistics at the New School for Social Research, New York, NY)

Scope and Purpose of the Study:

In the Spring of 1982, I made a linguistic analysis of letters of recommendation submitted as supporting documents for candidates applying for graduate study in the social sciences at a graduate facility in New York City. The purpose of the analysis was to verify my initial impressions suggesting that the general language, tone, and overall length of the letters varied in patterned ways depending on the gender a) of the letter writers, and b) of the candidates being written about.

The analysis focussed on twenty male and twenty female applicants, with accompanying letters of recommendation from one male and one female professor each, yielding a total of eighty letters examined for forty applicants. Half of the letters were for applicants to the psychology department, with the remaining evenly divided among the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, philosophy, economics, and political science.

The 80 letters were divided into four groups as follows:

- 1a. Letters written by women about women (20)
- 1b. Letters written by men about women (20)
- 2a. Letters written by women about men (20)
- 2b. Letters written by men about men (20)

The different groups of letters were then compared along the following lines:

1. Length: Total number of words per letter and average number of words per group.
2. Gender Identification: Total number of times the letter writers designated the gender of the candidates, by referring to them as men or women or the like.
3. Naming Patters: Total number of times the candidates were named in the body of the letters, and the break-down of this figure into four groups of name-types; Formal: M....

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