

## Do women use more standard language?

Standard English is a variety of English that is conventionally considered to be the accepted variety for public or formal use. Many people would also regard it as the 'correct' use of English, as opposed to various non-standard varieties (such as regional dialects). This worksheet focuses on differences in the way men and women speak with regards to standard and non-standard language. We will talk about why, in our society, there exists a divide in how women and men are expected to speak. Using BNClab, we will then check whether this divide is observable in actual language use.



### Key terms

gender

(non-)standard language

stereotypes

### Task 1

Let us first reflect on the nature of standard and non-standard language. Consider the following questions:

- How would you define standard language?

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- How would you define non-standard language?

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- When you think about how men and women use language, are there stereotypes related to who uses more standard and non-standard language? Discuss this with a partner.

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### Task 2

In this task, we are going to look at a structure often associated with non-standard language use: double negation (also called 'negative concord'). Double negation is a negative construction in which we find more than one marker of negation (e.g. not, n't, no, never, nothing). An example of a sentence that includes double negation is: *I haven't done nothing*. The standard alternative form substitutes the negative with forms such as *anything, anybody* or *anywhere* (*I haven't done anything*.)

- Can you provide another example of double negation? \_\_\_\_\_
- Why is double negation considered non-standard? \_\_\_\_\_

Use BNClab to search for examples of double negation in spoken language across the UK. There are different structures that contain double negation. One structure, for instance, consists of a negative particle (*no, can't, ain't, don't, ...*), followed by a verb and a negative indefinite noun (*nothing, nobody, nowhere, ...*). To search for this structure, you can use the following search terms:

n't (VERB) no  
n't (VERB) nothing

n't (VERB) nowhere  
n't (VERB) nobody

Search for two or more of these structures in BNClab. Remember, you can search for more than one phrase by adding OR between your search terms. You can also add your own search term!

- The structure you searched for: \_\_\_\_\_
- How frequent is the structure in the corpus? \_\_\_\_\_

### Task 3

We are now going to look at whether men or women use this structure more often and what other social factors may play a role in its use.

- Using the Gender button, how frequently is double negation used by men and women?

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- Has this changed from BNC1994 to BNC2014?

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- Using the Age button, can you see whether younger speakers use the non-standard form more often than older speakers?

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- Using the Region and Social class buttons, can you see any differences related to these social factors?

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Summarise your findings in a short report here. To check your findings, you can also use the summary statements found under the Summary button.

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Discuss your findings with your group. Consider your findings also in light of the following two statements:

- Many sociolinguistic studies have found that Standard English forms are used primarily by speakers of the highest social class as this variety is associated with high prestige.
- Many studies in the past have also found that nonstandard linguistic forms are preferred by men.

Why do you think that is the case? Does the findings from these studies match your results?

### Research bite



British sociolinguist Peter Trudgill was one of the first linguists in the UK to investigate different ways in which British English speakers used language and the social factors that affected this use. One of his early studies (1972) investigated the use of the non-standard –in [in] instead of –ing [ɪŋ] in words such as *walking*, *drawing*, *writing*. He found that women were more likely than men to use the standard variant over the non-standard and this was even more emphasized with middle class speakers (in comparison to working class speakers). This, Trudgill argues, might be because for women, the way they present themselves is more important than it is for men: men are evaluated on what they do, women on how they appear.

What do you think about Trudgill's explanation?