

Can She Talk the Talk? What Speech Patterns Say About Viola/Cesario

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Two key themes in *Twelfth Night* are gender and language. The plot revolves around Viola taking on a male role, and the humor draws deeply on the clever use of language throughout. This is a natural play for the study of gender and language in Shakespeare's work, and yet little of the feminist criticism that exists on *Twelfth Night* focuses on language. Much of that criticism centers on the eroticism of the ambivalent gender roles.¹ On the other hand, the linguistic criticism of *Twelfth Night* does not look closely at the gender differences.

Shakespeare exhibits a keen ear for speech patterns, and *Twelfth Night* is a good showcase for that talent. Elizabeth Yearling notes that Viola is a "linguistic chameleon" whose vocabulary ranges from courtly to jargon.² Sir Toby's speech, she says, "mixes impressive vocabulary and mannered syntax with colloquial words." Malvolio's language shows constraint, and Sir Andrew "magpie-like, purloins impressive words, misuses long words and tends to echo the speaker before him."³ In addition, Peter Gillett notes, Shakespeare throughout his plays often uses language to delineate class.⁴

The small amount of research on gender differences in Shakespeare's language finds few syntactic or lexical differences between Shakespeare's men and women. Edward Snow, who performs a close reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, draws some conclusions about how the male and female characters use language differently—not grammatically or semantically, but discursively.⁵ Evelyn Gajowski, in *The Art of Loving*, explores how the language of the heroines in three tragedies—*Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Othello*—helps establish the female characters as subjects in love rather than just objects.⁶ The differences, they both note, are not found in syntax or lexicon, but in more subtle uses of language.

Surely a talent such as Shakespeare had the ability to parse gender differences. Just as an actor (and Shakespeare was an actor) would change the pitch of his voice or his gait when playing a woman (and boys played all of the female parts at that time), one would think that Shakespeare the writer would adapt the language of his female characters accurately and provide for them distinct speech patterns. This leads to a key question in *Twelfth Night*: The main character, Viola/Cesario, is a woman posing as a man. Does she speak as a woman, even when wearing men's clothes? Does she try to disguise feminine speech as part of her effort to fit into a male world? I will argue that *Twelfth Night* shows no evidence of linguistic gender differences, but that the women do show evidence of their feminine side in their metaphors. Their choice of words reveals a different field of reference from the men's. Viola, in particular, maintains a feminine frame of reference while adapting her style to her masculine disguise.

In order to address the gender questions within *Twelfth Night*, a researcher first must determine the female speech patterns within the work. The work itself does not provide obvious clues. If one were to read the play with the names of the characters covered, it would be difficult to distinguish the men from the women in speeches that lack contextual clues. In an experiment in a graduate English seminar at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, ten speeches from the play were put into a document with no other context, and the students and professor asked to choose in a blind test which words were spoken by men and which by women. A couple of the students had studied Shakespeare's work, but many were only passingly familiar with it. Many had not read *Twelfth Night*. The best guesses got six out of the ten correct. Most were less than half. Remember, these are English graduate students who are likely to have a sensitivity to differences in language.

With the play providing so little help, a researcher must turn to past work in language and gender for direction. The seminal piece in distinguishing male and female speech is Robin Lakoff's 1975 *Language and Woman's Place*. Lakoff analyzes ways in which women choose their words and structure their sentences that mark their speech as feminine.⁷ She argues that women use both feminine and neutral speech and discern the appropriate time for each. She lays out nine markers of female speech, in two categories: lexical and syntactical. Lexical markers include words specific to women's work, such as *magenta*, *shirr* and *dart*; empty adjectives, such as *divine*, *charming*, *cute*; hedging words, such as *kind of*, *well*, *y'know*; the intensive *so*, as in "so cute" or "I like him so much"; and superpolite

forms, avoiding off-color or indelicate expressions, and using more euphemism.⁸ The syntactic markers include use of tag questions (“It’s hot, isn’t it?”) or rising intonations on declarative statements (in reply to “What’s your name,” the answer, “Mary Smith?”); hypercorrect grammar; lack of humor; and use of emphasis, in effect, speaking in italics.⁹ Lakoff’s work is specific to a time and culture, but the markers could still be telling if they or similar ones are present.

Ellen Barton also defines a method that could be useful in the search for language differences in Shakespeare. Building on Thomas Huckin’s procedures for discourse analysis within composition studies, she has developed a method she calls “rich feature analysis.” Rich features, as Barton defines them, “point to the relation between a text and its context. Rich features have both linguistic integrity (i.e., they are structural features of language, so they can be defined in linguistic terms and then categorized, coded, counted, and otherwise analyzed empirically) and contextual value (i.e., they can be conventionally connected to the matters of function, meaning interpretation and significance).”¹⁰ Rich features, Barton says, can be as small as the phonemes involved in the analysis of alliteration in rap lyrics or as large as the types of narratives used in male and female academic lectures.¹¹ It is a bottom-up method, searching out the rich features, followed by a top-down analysis of counting and coding them. It is a method that allows a scholar to analyze language on its own terms, using the whole work as the context to measure the speeches of individual characters.

Finally, Deborah Tannen, in her 1990 book *You Just Don’t Understand*, uncovers findings in gender differences between male and female speech that are useful. Drawing on a variety of samples gathered from both formal research and personal experience and experiences of others shared with her, she finds that women sit closer and establish more eye contact than men, though she argues that, despite the differences, both genders are equally engaged in the conversation.¹² She also finds that boys and men in general cover topics at a more abstract level than women and, significantly, that boys make occasional references to violence and that girls never do. Girls also seem greatly concerned about separation and avoidance of anger and disagreement.¹³ Girls make requests with “let’s,” boys with imperatives, she says.¹⁴ Confrontation in men is a way to establish intimacy. Women may avoid overt confrontation, but can mask power struggles and criticism in apparent cooperation and affiliation. Women talk indirectly about their mutual preferences and decisions. Men talk indirectly when speaking about personal relationships and feelings.¹⁵

Lakoff's work, while the markers are specific to the late twentieth-century woman, provides a straightforward place to start. A close look at the use of passive voice, imperatives, intensifiers, euphemism, or female-specific terms shows no difference between the men and women in *Twelfth Night*. The female characters do not soften their syntax or limit their vocabulary in ways that could not be better explained by their class or other variables. One of two theories might explain this lack of difference. Lakoff posits that women are bilingual: They speak their own language when among themselves and a neutral language when they are in mixed company.¹⁶ The women in *Twelfth Night* are always in mixed company, even when only Olivia and Viola are on stage alone, since Viola in those scenes is posing as a man. On the other hand, it may be that women in Renaissance England (other than Queen Elizabeth, of course) were to be seen and not heard. Women may not have had their own voice syntactically or lexically. Any differences in language would not have been recognized by a male writer such as Shakespeare. This theory would require much more research to establish, but it is possible that gendered language just was not heard in Shakespeare's time. That does not mean it was not spoken, just that it was not acknowledged.

Barton's "rich features" provides another promising approach. The play seems to provide a tantalizing clue in Viola's line to the Duke, "We men say more, swear more" (2.4.116).¹⁷ Perhaps the men in *Twelfth Night* more frequently swear their love. However, this statement ends up being ironic, as Viola is the one most often swearing hers. She does so three times, compared with once for Olivia and once for Duke Orsino. As for the number of words spoken about love, Orsino and Olivia nearly tie, with 629 and 609 respectively, compared with 247 for Viola. This difference is more likely explained by class. Viola, after all, is playing a servant. She cannot be as free with her speech.

The differences to be found in *Twelfth Night* are more discursive than linguistic, and Tannen's research provides a key to those differences. Two of Tannen's observations in *You Just Don't Understand* are evident in *Twelfth Night*. The men talk about violence often and the women rarely, if ever. In addition, the men talk in abstract, external terms regarding internal, emotional matters, while the women are more specific in matters of the heart.¹⁸

The violent imagery is most striking in *Twelfth Night*. It is a key part of the plot's resolution, with Viola avoiding a duel, but her twin, Sebastian, taking up the fight, leading to the final discovery that there are two of them. The violent language begins from the

opening scenes, however, and is a consistent gender marker. Duke Orsino, immediately after his opening speech, compares himself in love to a hunted deer.

O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
Methought she purg'd the air of pestilence!
That instant was I turn'd into a hart,
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
E'er since pursue me. (1.1.18-22)

He maintains the violent image of the hunt, switching Olivia to the role of Cupid's victim as he lauds her deep love for her brother:

How will she love when the rich golden shaft
Hath kill'd the flock of all affection else. (1.1.34-35)

Olivia's opening scene, in contrast, has her dealing with the fool Feste gently, despite a different expectation. Maria, Olivia's servant, tells Feste, "My lady will hang thee for thy absence" (1.5.3-4; incidentally, this is one of only three violent images uttered by women in the play, two of which come from Maria, the servant). Olivia instead orders her attendants, "Take the fool away" (1.5.38). Her response is more a time out—banishment, not violence. And even then, like a clever child with a doting mother, Feste talks his way out of that punishment and rejoins the household with his former level of responsibility. Later in act 1, when Olivia falls in love with Viola/Cesario, she likens it to a disease: "Even so quickly may one catch the plague?" (1.5.295). Olivia uses only one violent image—the final time Viola/Cesario denies her suit—and it is a passive one. In describing the object of her love in an aside, she says,

A murd'rous guilt shows not itself more soon
Than love that would seem hid: love's night is noon.
(3.1.147-48)

Note that the violent image, "murd'rous," is an adjective and that the subject of the sentence is "guilt." Guilt is far more appropriate for a woman, and with her sentence construction, Olivia tames the one aggressive metaphor that comes out of her mouth.

If Olivia's language is notable in the absence of violent imagery, Viola's language, in her role as herself and as Cesario, is striking in its imagery of passive resistance. In her opening scene, Viola, still wearing her "women's weeds," assumes her brother has drowned in the storm that has left her shipwrecked on Illyria. But her response to that initial thought is to hope that he has survived, as she has. In fact, she gives the ship's captain gold for bolstering her

hope—almost as if it were a ransom that could buy her brother back from what she assumes is a watery grave. In stark contrast, Sebastian assumes his sister has drowned and wishes himself dead. In fact, the conversation between him and his companion Antonio is full of violent images:

Antonio: If you will not murder me for my love, let
me be your servant.

Sebastian: If you will not undo what you have done,
that is kill him whom you have recover'd, desire it
not. (2.1.35-39)

Both comments are made out of deep affection and not anger. The violence is simply part of their frame of reference and not part of Viola's.

Viola adapts her soft language when she plays Cesario, the eunuch servant of Duke Orsino. What had been a passive, hopeful outlook becomes a more forceful passive resistance. The duke sends Viola to woo Olivia on his behalf with these instructions:

Be clamorous and leap all civil bounds,
Rather than make unprofit return ...
Surprise her with discourse of my dear faith. (1.4.21-22, 25)

“Surprise” in this sense means to overcome or overpower.¹⁹ Orsino tells Viola to wrestle Olivia's affections on his behalf. Viola instead takes her own approach. Malvolio has met Viola at the door and brings Olivia this report:

And he says he'll stand at
your door like a sheriff's post, and be the supporter to
a bench, but he'll speak with you. (1.5.147-49)

“Sheriff's post” is a strong image and a bench support must bear great weight, but neither is an offensive weapon. When Viola/Cesario gains access, she tells Olivia,

I bring no overture
of war, no taxation of homage; I hold the
olive in my hand; my words are as full of peace as
matter. (1.5.208-11)

As she builds a case for Orsino, Viola uses no metaphors of violence. When Olivia asks her how she would show her love if she were Orsino, Viola gives a powerful image of passive aggression.

Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house;

Write loyal cantons of contemned love,
 And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
 Hallow your name to the reverberate hills,
 And make the babbling gossip of the air
 Cry out "Olivia!" O, you should not rest
 Between the elements of air and earth
 But you should pity me! (1.5.268-76)

A similar tactic was used in 1989 by the U.S. military to get Manuel Noriega to surrender from his refuge in the Papal Nuncio in Panama: Soldiers blasted loud rock music outside day and night while negotiations continued. It is an effective military strategy, but a passive one.

When Viola professes her own love subversively to Orsino, it is in the manner of a jailed activist on a hunger strike. In the guise of Cesario, she tells Orsino of a fictional sister who loved a man as she might love the Duke were she a woman:

She never told her love,
 But let concealment like a worm I' th' bud
 Feed on her damask cheek; she pin'd in thought,
 And with green and yellow melancholy
 She sate like Patience on a monument,
 Smiling at grief. (2.4.110-15)

Orsino, taking in this mental picture, brings his masculine frame of reference. He asks,

But died thy sister of her love, my boy? (2.5.119)

That is hardly the point in Viola's frame of reference. Her language shows a will of iron, one that will not be moved, but one also that will not take the role of aggressor. It is reminiscent of the non-violent strategies of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Hers is a love that believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. The men, in contrast, practice love that conquers all.

The final example of this difference comes in the final act, when Olivia and Orsino face one another after Olivia has married Sebastian, thinking she has taken Viola/Cesario as her husband. Olivia refuses Orsino a final time, and Orsino recognizes where her affections lie. His response is full of violence:

Why should I not (had I the heart to do it),
 Like to th' Egyptian thief at point of death,
 Kill what I love? (a savage jealousy
 That sometime savors nobly), but hear me this:
 Since you to non-regardance cast my faith,
 And that I partly know the instrument

That screws me from my true place in your favor,
 Live you the marble-breasted tyrant still,
 But this your minion, whom I know you love,
 And whom, by heaven I swear I tender dearly,
 Him will I tear out of that cruel eye,
 Where he sits crowned in his master's spite.
 Come, boy, with me, my thoughts are ripe in mischief.
 I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love,
 To spite a raven's heart within a dove. (5.1.117-31)

Viola's response is to offer herself as that sacrifice:

And I most jocund, apt, and willingly,
 To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die. (5.1.132-33)

The difference in imagery is striking to the end.

The discrepancies in male and female speech are also evident when the characters are talking about relationships. The men speak in abstracts, the women in specifics. This is evident from Orsino's first speech, where he speaks in abstract about the nature of love and appetite rather than about his own heartache. When he gets specific, he objectifies Olivia, attributing to her a magic that turns him into a hunted hart (1.1.18-22). When he talks to Cesario/Viola about his love for Olivia in act 2, he again immediately reverts to abstracts, saying, "For such as I am, all true lovers are" (2.4.17). A few lines later, the Duke gives Cesario/Viola advice, not in the second person, directly to his servant. Rather, his advice is generalized, in the third person:

Let still the woman take
 An elder than herself, so wears she to him;
 So sways she level in her husband's heart. (2.4.29-31)

Olivia and Viola, both as herself and as Cesario, are more specific in their speech. In Olivia and Viola's first meeting, the abstract pleasantries are quickly undercut by both women's desire to get to specifics. Throughout the discourse, both women remain in the first and second persons, continually asking direct questions to try to gain information about each other. The following lines are only an example:

Viola: Good gentle one, give
 Me modest assurances if you be the lady of the house,
 That I may proceed in my speech.

Olivia: Are you a comedian?

Viola: No, my profound heart; and yet (by the very
 fangs of malice I swear) I am not that I play. Are you
 the lady of the house? (1.5.179-85)

Even in Viola's most abstract moment, the "willow cabin" speech, she maintains the second person. She is specific about her feelings, though they are for the Duke and not for Olivia. Viola no sooner finishes her declaration than Olivia follows with another specific question: "What is your parentage?" (1.5.277)

The difference is apparent again in Viola's exchange with Orsino in the previous scene:

Viola: Say that some lady, as perhaps there is,
Hath for your love as great a pang of heart
As you have for Olivia. You cannot love her;
You tell her so. Must she not then be answer'd?

Duke: There is no woman's sides
Can bide the beating of so strong a passion: (2.4.89-94)

Viola gives a specific example relating to the Duke. Orsino replies in the abstract: "No woman's sides." Just a few lines later, when Viola makes a general statement about love, she follows it immediately with a specific example:

In faith, they are as true of heart as we.
My father had a daughter lov'd a man
As it might be perhaps, were I a woman,
I should love your lordship. (2.4.106-09)

Viola consistently takes abstract ideas and makes them specific, while Orsino takes the specific and makes it abstract.

The difference also can be seen in the other characters. In the first appearance of Maria and Sir Toby, they talk about Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Toby focuses on the outward, general attributes of his friend; Maria, on specific, internal traits that define his character—and in the woman's eyes make him unattractive. Toby points out that Aguecheek is "as tall a man as any's in Illyria" (1.3.20). He has an income of three thousand ducats a year, he plays a musical instrument and speaks "three or four languages word for word without book" (1.3.26-27). These are all exterior details, not dealing with the man he is inside. Maria points out that Aguecheek easily spends all of that income and that "he's a fool, he's a great quarreler" (1.3.30). These observations go straight to his character.

When Maria talks with Feste the clown, she is specific, while he steers the conversation into the abstract.

Maria: My lady will hang thee for thy absence.

Clown: Let her hang me! He that is well hang'd in
this world needs to fear no colors.

Maria: Make that good.

Clown: He shall see none to fear.

Maria: A good Lenten answer. I can tell thee where

that saying was born, of "I fear no colors."

Clown: Where, good Mistress Mary?

Maria: In the wars, and that may you be bold to say
in your foolery.

Clown: Well, God give them wisdom that have it; and
those that are fools, let them use their talents.

Maria: Yet you will be hang'd for being so long
absent, or to be turn'd away—is not that as good as a
hanging to you? (1.5.3-18)

Throughout the exchange, Maria joins Feste in an abstract joke, then brings the conversation back to the specifics at hand: the consequences the clown is about to face for an extended absence. She follows the pattern of women speaking directly about emotional matters, while men tend to the indirect or abstract.

I began this paper with the notion that perhaps Viola changed her speech from female to male just as she changed her clothes. There is no doubt in my mind that Shakespeare was a skilled enough writer to accomplish that if he had intended it. I found there is a gender difference in the play, but not within Viola's speech. If anything, she consistently straddles the line between masculine and feminine discourse, at least as far as the violent metaphors go. Instead of donning masculine language, she uses strong words of passive resistance. In regard to indirect versus direct speech, Viola maintains her female patterns. She can get away with failing to talk the talk in a man's world because she presents herself as a eunuch. She is not expected to be one of the guys in every way, and this allows her to straddle the male and female Renaissance worlds.

This may be part of her appeal to Olivia, who at this point in her life wants nothing to do with men. Olivia sees in Viola/Cesario a different kind of man—one who can speak her language, a gentle soul who still has a will of iron. Viola's speech is the first attraction Olivia mentions when she enumerates them after their first meeting:

Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit
Do give thee fivefold blazon. (1.5.292-93)

Viola goes to Olivia to woo her for Duke Orsino, but she ends up wooing in behalf of her lost brother, Sebastian. It is possible, given Olivia's attitude about the male world, that Sebastian could not have done the job himself. Olivia needed a gentler approach than Sebastian, with his masculine roughness, could bring. Viola's female speech in her male body also allows her to woo Duke Orsino in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. She is able to express her love in words he can understand and show him an

intelligent side that makes him love her before he knows the truth about her.

In this play that is so much about gender, Shakespeare may not have distinguished the sexes by their language; but the characters speak from their experience, and the differences show up in the way they relate to the world. Fighting was part of the identity of Renaissance men, and their violent metaphors come naturally. The women developed other ways to show their strength, and their language reflects that. Emotional matters, on the other hand, are the domain of women, and the women are able to speak about them directly, whereas the men avoid addressing them head-on.

Viola remains true to her gender in her language, even while masquerading in trousers and a hat. In the process, she inadvertently becomes a bridge for Olivia's return to her role as a marriageable woman and she opens a door for her own future that otherwise never would have been available.

Notes

1. Valerie Traub, "The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy," in *Shakespeare, Feminism and Gender: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 135-160; Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (New York: Methuen Publishing, 1985), 166-190; Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

2. Elizabeth Yearling, "Language, Theme and Character," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 78.

3. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

4. Peter J. Gillett, "Me, U and Non-U: Class Connotations of Two Shakespearean Idioms," in *Reader in the Language of Shakespearean Drama*, ed. Vivian Salmon and Edwina Burness (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1987), 117-29.

5. Edward Snow, "Language and Sexual Difference in *Romeo and Juliet*," in *Shakespeare's Rough Magic: Renaissance Essays in Honor of C.L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppelia Kahn (Lisbon and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), 168-92.

6. Evelyn Gajowski, *The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992).

7. Robin Lakoff, *Language and a Woman's Place* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975).

8. *Ibid.*, 53-54.

9. *Ibid.*, 55-56.

10. Ellen Barton, "Linguistic Discourse Analysis: How the Language in Texts Works," in *What Writing Does and How It Does It*, ed. Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 66.

11. *Ibid.*, 66.

12. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 268-70.
13. *Ibid.*, 259.
14. *Ibid.*, 154.
15. *Ibid.*, 149-65, 276-77.
16. Lakoff, *Language and a Woman's Place*, 6-7.
17. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 2.4.116. All subsequent references to the play are from this edition.
18. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, 276-77.
19. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "surprise," definition 1b, <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/>.