Negotiating Gender Identity and Power: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Women's Language in *Divergent* Movie

Bulan Hontinimbang Ligatu [1], Suleman Bouti [2], Fahria Malabar [3]

ligatubulan@gmail.com

[1, 2, 3]Faculty of Literature and Culture, Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, Gorontalo, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Lakoff's women's language features appear in the speech of Beatrice Prior in the film *Divergent* (2014). The research focuses on three aspects: the types of women's language feature she uses, how these features are distributed across Abnegation and Dauntless, and how Beatrice's social roles influence her linguistic choices. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, and the data consist of selected utterances that are classified based on Lakoff's framework. The findings show that Beatrice uses several features such as lexical hedges, intensifiers, super polite forms, tag questions, and rising intonation. These features appear differently depending on the setting. In Abnegation, her speech is more polite and controlled, reflecting the values of the faction. After joining Dauntless, her language becomes more expressive and direct. The analysis also indicates that her shifts in social roles contribute to the changes in the way she speaks. The study highlights that her linguistic style adapts to the environment and the roles she performs throughout the story.

Keywords: Divergent movie; Social roles; Sociolinguistics; Women's language features

INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a social practice that shapes identity, expresses power relations, and structures patterns of interaction. Within sociolinguistics, this perspective is reinforced by scholars who argue that gendered communication is inherently tied to the social and cultural contexts in which it occurs. Recent research on gender inclusive language in the context of the German Bundestag demonstrates that as social norms evolve, speakers adapt their linguistic practices accordingly, using pair forms, inclusive nouns, and other gender sensitive forms to reflect changing expectations about gender and identity (Müller-Spitzer & Ochs, 2024).

A seminal contribution to the study of gendered language is Lakoff's (1975) theory of women's language features. (Lakoff, 1975) proposes that linguistic elements such as hedges, intensifiers, super polite forms, tag questions, and rising intonation arise from social pressures that encourage women to adopt speech patterns associated with politeness, gentleness, and non-assertiveness. Although subsequent studies have expanded and critiqued Lakoff's claims, her framework remains influential for understanding how gender expectations shape linguistic choices and how women's language functions as a socially conditioned phenomenon.

These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant for the analysis of narrative media, where linguistic choices are intentionally constructed to reveal character identity, interactional dynamics, and social positioning. In the film *Divergent* (2014), Beatrice Prior transitions between two factions, Abnegation and Dauntless, which represent contrasting values and communicative norms. Abnegation emphasizes self-restraint, humility, and politeness, whereas Dauntless promotes assertiveness, expressiveness, and bold behavior. These contrasting environments provide a compelling context for examining how women's language features may shift in response to differing social expectations and identity roles.

Existing research supports the significance of investigating feminine linguistic features in filmic discourse. (Wulandari & Sari, 2024) demonstrate that the protagonist of *Enola Holmes 2* employs women's language features to negotiate agency and relational positioning. According to (Ainurisanti, 2023), analyzing *Little Women*, reveals that the use of feminine linguistic markers varies in accordance with character roles, interpersonal dynamics, and situational demands. (Lestari et al., 2024) find that characters in *Lady Bird* consistently use hedges, tag questions, rising intonation, intensifiers, and super polite forms to express emotional depth and identity construction. Likewise, (Mahmoud, 2021) report that gendered language serves not only to signal femininity but also to express identity and negotiate power dynamics within the narrative.

Despite this growing body of literature, research that focuses on the development of women's language features within a single character across contrasting social settings remains limited. Most studies examine general portrayals of female characters or compare several characters within the same narrative, leaving insufficient attention to how a protagonist's linguistic behavior evolves alongside shifts in social roles and environments. This gap is important because observing one character's movement across differing settings offers a clearer understanding of how gendered linguistic features adapt to changing social conditions.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the linguistic behavior of Beatrice Prior in *Divergent*. The objectives of this research are to identify the women's language features present in her speech, analyze how these features differ across the Abnegation and Dauntless faction contexts, and examine how her linguistic choices shift in relation to the social roles she assumes throughout the film. By exploring these aspects, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how feminine linguistic features operate as adaptive strategies within evolving social environments.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for examining linguistic features in depth because it focuses on meaning, context, and interpretation. The subject of this study is Beatrice Prior, the protagonist of the 2014 film *Divergent*, and the primary data consist of her spoken utterances throughout the film. The film was selected as the data source because it presents contrasting social environments, namely the Abnegation and Dauntless factions, which provide a clear basis for analyzing linguistic variation that emerges from shifting social roles.

In this qualitative design, the researcher functions as the main instrument responsible for observing, identifying, classifying, and interpreting the data. Several supporting instruments were also used, including transcription sheets, a coding table for categorizing women's language features based on Lakoff's framework, and documentation files containing verified transcripts and contextual notes. Data collection was conducted through several steps. The film was watched repeatedly to understand the narrative structure and character interactions. All of Beatrice's spoken utterances were then transcribed manually and cross

checked with subtitle files to ensure accuracy. Utterances that contained or potentially contained women's language features were identified and selected based on linguistic relevance, contextual significance, and the presence of shifts in setting or social roles. These utterances were then organized based on faction environment, interaction partners, and situational context.

Data analysis followed a structured process. First, each selected utterance was classified according to the types of women's language features proposed by Lakoff. Next, the utterances were examined within their narrative context to understand how linguistic choices reflected faction norms or shifts in character roles. Patterns of linguistic variation were then identified by comparing Beatrice's speech across Abnegation and Dauntless and across roles such as daughter, initiate, friend, and protector. Finally, the findings were interpreted to explain how Beatrice's linguistic behavior contributes to the representation of her identity development throughout the film.

Data validity is ensured through credibility and confirmability procedures. Credibility is maintained by aligning film observations with theoretical references to avoid unsupported interpretation. Confirmability is ensured through academic consultation to reduce potential interpretive bias and maintain analytical stability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Result
Identification of Women's Language Features Used by Beatrice Prior

Based on the analysis of Beatrice Prior's utterances in Divergent (2014), ten types of women's language features proposed by Lakoff were identified. These features appear through emotional expressions, forms of lexical uncertainty, polite linguistic markers, and intonational patterns that convey hesitation or heightened emotion. The identification process followed an observation checklist that included Empty Adjectives, Tag Questions, Rising Intonation, Lexical Hedges, Precise Color Terms, Intensifiers, Hypercorrect Grammar, Super Polite Forms, Avoidance of Strong Swear Words, and Emphatic Stress.

The findings indicate that lexical hedges, rising intonation, and super polite forms are the most frequently used features in Beatrice's speech. Words and phrases such as maybe, think, kind of, along with hesitation markers like um, show her tendency to soften statements and reduce the degree of assertiveness. Rising intonation is also prominent in several emotionally charged moments, such as "Wait. Really?", "You need to stay away from me!", and "Four! It's me!" each producing an effect of uncertainty, urgency, or a request for confirmation. In addition, Beatrice consistently uses polite expressions such as please, would, could, thank you, and sorry, reflecting a communication style that prioritizes harmony and interpersonal sensitivity.

Other features, including intensifiers (e.g., so, more) and emphatic stress (e.g., stress on words like supposed or safer), reveal how Beatrice uses linguistic emphasis to express emotion or highlight particular meanings. Avoidance of strong swear words is also evident through mild exclamations such as "Oh my God," which function as softer alternatives to harsher expressions. Taken together, these patterns form a clear feminine linguistic profile that Beatrice maintains even within the Dauntless environment a social context associated with boldness, directness, and physical intensity.

Interpretation of your results includes discussing how your results modify and fit in with what we previously understood about the problem. Review the literature again at this time. After completing the experiments, you will have much greater insight into the subject, and by going through some of the literature again, information that seemed trivial before, or was

overlooked, may tie something together and therefore prove very important to your own interpretation. Be sure to cite the works that you refer to. Elaborate on your explanation clearly. Should you need to use some points, you may use the points format as follows:

Distribution of Women's Language Features Across Abnegation and Dauntless Contexts

The distribution of women's language features in Beatrice Prior's speech shows a clear contrast between the Abnegation and Dauntless environments. The categorized data indicate that certain features occur more frequently in Abnegation scenes, while others become more prominent after Beatrice joins Dauntless. These patterns reflect the differing social values of the two factions and illustrate how her linguistic behavior shifts in response to environmental expectations.
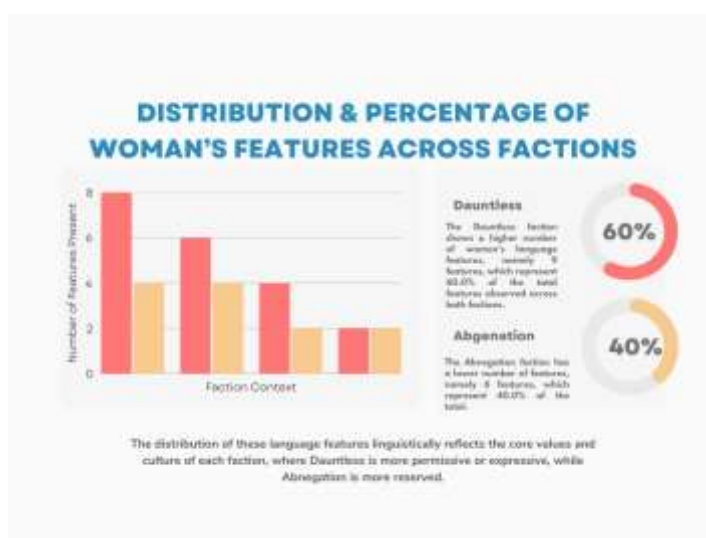
Graph 1. Distribution & Percentage of Women's Language Features Across Factions

In the Abnegation setting defined by restraint, humility, and emotional discipline. Beatrice produces a higher number of super polite forms, lexical hedges, and instances of hypercorrect grammar. These features align with Abnegation's cultural norms, which encourage modest and indirect communication. Expressions such as *"please," "thank you," "would you…,"* and softening phrases like *"I think…"* or *"maybe…"* appear frequently in her early interactions. The observation checklist confirms that polite forms and hedges consistently dominate her utterances in this context, reflecting the communicative style she internalized while growing up in Abnegation.

Upon entering Dauntless, Beatrice's speech begins to exhibit more intensifiers, emphatic stress, and rising intonation. These changes correspond to Dauntless values centered on boldness, emotional force, and direct confrontation. The analyzed data reveal examples such as *"It's safer if I stay with you!", "He's trying to kill you!",* and *"Four! It's me!"* all characterized by heightened emotional delivery and strong intonational patterns. The checklist also shows an increase in emphatic stress and upward intonation during her Dauntless interactions, indicating a shift toward a more expressive and urgent communication style.

Despite adapting to Dauntless norms, Beatrice continues to use feminine linguistic features particularly hedges and polite forms though less frequently. This suggests that while situational demands influence her speech, certain elements of her communicative identity remain stable. The contrast between her Abnegation-related politeness and Dauntless-related intensity reflects the transitional nature of her identity and the social pressures she navigates throughout the narrative.

Linguistic Adaptation Across Beatrice Prior's Social Roles

Beatrice Prior's linguistic behavior reveals clear shifts as she navigates multiple social positions throughout the film. Her roles as a daughter in Abnegation, a Dauntless initiate, a friend and peer, a romantic partner, and later a protector strongly influence how she selects, adapts, and expresses various features of women's language. The dataset indicates that her use of polite forms, hedges, rising intonation, intensifiers, and emphatic stress changes in response to the situational demands and interpersonal contexts she encounters.

In her position as a daughter within Abnegation, Beatrice consistently relies on highly polite expressions and lexical hedges, demonstrating her adherence to the faction's principles of modesty and restraint. Phrases such as "Thank you," "Please," "I think…," and "Maybe…" reflect a communicative style grounded in obedience and deference. These linguistic choices align with her role as a respectful family member shaped by Abnegation's emphasis on selflessness.

When she becomes a Dauntless initiate, her speech undergoes a noticeable transformation. She begins to use rising intonation, intensifiers, and emphatic stress more frequently features that mirror Dauntless ideals of courage, emotional intensity, and assertive behavior. Utterances like "Wait. Really?" "He's trying to kill you!", and "It's safer if I stay with you!" exemplify heightened urgency and stronger emotional force. Although hedges and polite forms do not disappear completely, they appear less often as she adapts to the demanding and competitive nature of Dauntless life.

In her interactions with friends and peers, Beatrice adopts a more balanced combination of hedges, polite forms, and rising intonation. These elements serve relational purposes, helping her maintain solidarity and navigate interpersonal closeness. The dataset shows that in conversations with characters such as Christina. she uses softer linguistic cues to manage emotional nuances and display empathy.

Her role as a romantic partner further increases the use of rising intonation and intensifiers, particularly during moments of vulnerability or emotional openness. Utterances like "It's me!" and "I don't want to be just one thing" illustrate how linguistic choices allow her to communicate trust and emotional depth, blending assertiveness with intimacy. in scenes where she acts as a protector especially during dangerous situations Beatrice relies more heavily on emphatic stress and direct, unmitigated forms. Her speech becomes firmer and more urgent, often expressed through warnings or commands. Even so, traces of feminine linguistic features remain evident, suggesting that her assertiveness evolves not through the rejection of femininity, but through the integration of feminine characteristics with a growing sense of authority.

Sociolinguistic Interpretation of Beatrice's Linguistic Variation

Beatrice Prior's On the whole linguistic pattern illustrates a fluid relationship between gender-linked language features and the sociolinguistic pressures surrounding her. The ways she shifts between hedges, polite forms, rising intonation, intensifiers, and emphatic stress reflect both her individual character trajectory and the broader influence of context, power dynamics, and emotional intensity. These fluctuations show that language operates as an adaptable resource, shaped by ongoing identity construction, social positioning, and situational requirements.

Within the Abnegation environment, her preference for highly polite expressions and frequent hedging underscores the faction's emphasis on modesty and self-discipline. Her speech in this setting constructs a persona that aligns with collectivist expectations, where suppressing overt self-assertion is considered appropriate. From a sociolinguistic standpoint,

these features situate her within a community that values indirect communication and restrained emotional display.

Her entry into Dauntless triggers a distinct linguistic shift. The increased use of intensifiers, emphatic stress, and pronounced rising intonation reflects her adjustment to a speech culture that rewards boldness, immediacy, and emotional transparency. These developments can be viewed as her response to unfamiliar power hierarchies in which assertiveness is necessary for legitimacy and survival. Nonetheless, occasional hedges and polite forms remain present, indicating that she does not completely shed her Abnegation speech style but instead integrates contrasting norms to manage her evolving identity.

Her linguistic variation also mirrors changes in her interpersonal relationships. In friendships, she draws on softer features to show empathy and maintain solidarity. In romantic contexts, rising intonation and intensifiers convey emotional openness and trust. In situations requiring protection or leadership, emphatic stress and direct forms express authority and urgency. Collectively, these patterns demonstrate how she employs language to perform different relational roles depending on the demands of each social context.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the linguistic patterns identified throughout the analysis, all ten women's language features found in Beatrice Prior's utterances were consolidated into a single summary table. This table integrates the findings from the identification stage, contextual distribution across Abnegation and Dauntless, and the variations influenced by her social roles. By presenting the complete dataset in a unified format, Table 1 serves as the central reference for understanding how each linguistic feature functions and shifts within different narrative contexts of the film.

Table 1. Summary of All Women's Language Features Used by Beatrice Prior in *Divergent*

No	Women's Language Feature	Example Utterances (Data)	Context of Appearance	Abnegation Presence	Dauntless Presence	Functional Meaning
1	***Empty Adjectives***	"Amazing."	Both	Low	Low	Shows emotional response or evaluation
2	***Tag Questions***	"You remember me, right?"	Dauntless	None	Moderate	Soften statements; request confirmation
3	***Rising Intonation***	"Wait. Really?" / "Four! It's me!	Dauntless	None	High	Indicates urgency, emotional intensity, uncertainty
4	***Lexical Hedges Fillers***	"Maybe…" / "I think…" / "Kind of…" / "Um…"	Both	High	Moderate	Reduce certainty; soften claims; mark hesitation
5	***Precise Color Terms***	(None found)	-	None	None	Shows lack of descriptive aesthetic emphasis

6	*Intensifiers*	"More…" / "So…"	Both	Low	Moderate	Emphasizes emotional force or meaning
7	*Hypercorrect Grammar*	"What's going on?"	Both	Moderate	Low	Shows careful, formal, or controlled speech
8	*Super Polite Forms*	"Please." / "Sorry." / "Would you…" / "Thank you."	Both	High	Moderate	Signals politeness, humility, relational softness
9	*Avoidance of Strong Swear Words*	"Oh my God!"	Dauntless	None	Moderate	Expresses emotion with mild, non-vulgar wording
10	*Emphatic Stress*	"Who? Who will?" / "Safer?"	Both	Moderate	High	Adds emotional weight; expresses fear, urgency, tension

As shown in Table 1, Beatrice's linguistic behavior reflects both stability and adaptation across the narrative. While she consistently maintains several feminine linguistic traits, the intensity and frequency of these features shift according to faction norms, emotional demands, and interpersonal dynamics. The table highlights how gendered language operates as a flexible resource that Beatrice strategically modifies to navigate contrasting social environments. These summarized findings thus form the foundation for interpreting her linguistic identity and its development throughout the film.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that Beatrice Prior consistently uses several women's language features proposed by Lakoff (1975), including hedges, polite forms, rising intonation, intensifiers, and emphatic stress. These features do not simply index femininity in a traditional sense but function as adaptive communicative strategies that help her manage emotional tension, negotiate relationships, and position herself within shifting social environments. This pattern supports the argument that feminine linguistic markers should not be viewed solely as signs of passivity, but as pragmatic tools that reflect agency and context sensitivity. Similar interpretations are highlighted in studies of film discourse, where feminine linguistic features are shown to serve interactional and narrative functions rather than reproducing stereotypes (Lestari et al., 2024; Wulandari & Sari, 2024).

When examined across the contrasting environments of Abnegation and Dauntless, Beatrice's linguistic behavior demonstrates clear sociolinguistic conditioning. In Abnegation, where modesty and emotional restraint are valued, her preference for hedges and polite forms reflects the faction's normative expectations. These findings are consistent with the understanding that linguistic behavior is shaped by broader cultural expectations, as shown by research demonstrating that speakers modify their language in response to shifting social norms and increasingly gender sensitive practices (Müller-Spitzer & Ochs, 2024). Meanwhile, in Dauntless, her increased use of rising intonation, emphatic stress, and intensifiers corresponds

with the faction's emphasis on assertiveness, emotional expression, and rapid responsiveness. This shift is consistent with (Ainurisanti, 2023) observation that feminine linguistic features adapt according to situational demands and interpersonal dynamics in film narratives. However, Beatrice does not fully abandon her earlier communicative tendencies. Instead, she blends elements from both factions, suggesting that gendered language is flexible and shaped by the interplay between personal identity and environmental constraints.

Her linguistic variation becomes more evident when viewed through the different social roles she performs. As a daughter and member of Abnegation, she relies on polite forms and softening devices to maintain relational harmony, which is consistent with (Mahmoud, 2021), who note that language in film often functions as a means of articulating identity and managing social dynamics within the narrative. As a Dauntless initiate, she adopts a more expressive style marked by intensifiers and emphatic stress, reflecting the demands of a high-risk environment. Yet traces of her earlier speech style remain, suggesting a gradual negotiation of identity rather than a complete transformation. In her roles as friend, romantic partner, and protector, Beatrice blends strategies from both factions to express empathy, assertiveness, and emotional involvement. This demonstrates that feminine linguistic features can be used to express agency and emotional depth, supporting (Wulandari & Sari, 2024) findings that feminine language in contemporary films often functions as a resource for empowerment.

The flexible and adaptive nature of Beatrice's linguistic patterns indicates that gendered language cannot be explained solely through Lakoff's model, which tends to frame women's features as markers of uncertainty. Instead, the results suggest a more dynamic interpretation where feminine linguistic features operate as context dependent strategies shaped by situational demands, interpersonal roles, and character development. An alternative explanation for these shifts may also lie in the narrative construction of the film itself, where screenwriters intentionally craft linguistic contrasts to highlight character growth and emotional intensity. This narrative driven factor should be considered as it may contribute to the stylistic variation observed in Beatrice's speech.

The findings have theoretical significance for gender and language studies. They support the contemporary view that gendered language is fluid and shaped by social environments rather than fixed gender categories. They also show that feminine linguistic markers can contribute to identity construction and relational communication within fictional narratives. Nevertheless, the study has limitations. The analysis focuses on a single character in one film, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The study also relies on manual interpretation of dialogue without acoustic analysis, which limits the examination of prosodic features such as stress and intonation. Additionally, because film scripts are crafted for dramatic purposes, some linguistic patterns may reflect narrative intentions rather than natural conversational tendencies.

Future research may benefit from examining multiple female characters across different genres to determine whether similar patterns of adaptive feminine language appear in varied narrative contexts. Comparative studies between films and real-life conversations may also help clarify which linguistic features reflect natural gendered behavior and which are shaped by cinematic representation. Such research would deepen the understanding of how gender, identity, and social context interact in shaping linguistic performance.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that Beatrice Prior's linguistic behavior reflects a dynamic use of women's language features that shifts according to her social environment and the roles she performs throughout the film *Divergent*. Although she consistently employs features identified by Lakoff such as hedges, polite forms, rising intonation, intensifiers, and emphatic stress, these elements do not function as markers of uncertainty. Instead, they serve as adaptable communicative strategies that allow her to negotiate emotions, express agency, and manage interactions across contrasting contexts. Her linguistic patterns in Abnegation, which emphasize restraint and politeness, contrast with her more expressive and assertive speech in Dauntless. The combination of these patterns demonstrates that gendered communication is shaped by situational demands and relational expectations rather than fixed gender categories.

These results are important because they highlight the fluidity of feminine linguistic features and provide evidence that women's language must be understood within its sociocultural context. The study contributes to gender and language research by showing that feminine linguistic traits in film narratives operate as tools for identity construction, emotional expression, and negotiation of social roles, expanding previous interpretations that tended to view these features as passive or subordinated. This research is original in its focus on one character who experiences two distinct social systems within a single narrative, allowing for clearer observations of linguistic adaptation than studies that compare multiple characters or single setting contexts.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on one film and one character, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The analysis also relies on manual interpretation without acoustic measurements, which restricts the examination of prosodic detail. Future research may extend this study by comparing multiple female characters across different films or genres, examining the interplay between narrative construction and linguistic choices, or incorporating multimodal analysis to explore gesture, tone, and visual cues. Such extensions would deepen the understanding of how gender, identity, and social context influence linguistic performance in both fictional and real-world settings.

REFERENCES

Ainurisanti, R. D. (2023). Women's Language Features in Jo March's Dialogues from Little Women Movie. *JoLLA: Journal of Language, Literature, and Arts*, *3*(10), 1462–1473. https://doi.org/10.17977/um064v3i102023p1462-1473

Lakoff, R. (1975). Language and woman's place. In *Lang. Soc* (Vol. 2).

Mahmoud, N. K. E. A. E. (2021). Language and Gender Analysis of Three Walt Disney Movies A Study of Female Language Features of Three Princesses. *Journal of the Faculty of Education*.

Müller-Spitzer, C., & Ochs, S. (2024). *Shifting social norms as a driving force for linguistic change: Struggles about language and gender in the German Bundestag 1*. https://fackel.oeaw.ac.at/F/351,066

Lestari, N. P. T. P., Beratha, N. L. S., & Sukarini, N. W. (2024). Women's Language Features in the Lady Bird Movie. *International Journal of Education, Language, Literature, Arts, Culture, and Social Humanities*, *2*(2), 94–103. https://doi.org/10.59024/ijellacush.v2i2.793

Wulandari, D. R., & Sari, P. (2024). *THE FEATURES OF WOMEN'S LANGUAGE IN "ENOLA HOLMES 2" FILM: A SOCIOLINGUISTICS STUDY*. https://doi.org/10.33197/ejlutama.vol8.iss1.2023.2655.455