# Language Features Used by Non-binary Gender in Sam Smith's Interviews

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**Abstract--**The different characteristics of men and women affect the selection of different language characters between men and women. However, the rise of non-binary gender challenges the rigid categorization of language as masculine or feminine. This study aimed to identify the language features used by Sam Smith as a non-binary individual and the influence of social factors in their selection. The data were collected using a documentation method in the form of utterances uttered by Sam Smith in two YouTube interviews. A descriptive qualitative method is used to analyze the data using the theory of language features by Coates (2013) and the theory of social factors that influence language use by Holmes (2013). The findings show that Sam Smith used all seven types of language features in the interview with a male interviewer. Meanwhile, with a female interviewer, only six types of language features were used, where the commands and directives features were not found. This study further revealed that there were differences in the frequency of language features used in the two interviews, which were influenced by social factors, including participants, setting, topic, and function.

Keywords: *language features, social factors, non-binary gender, interviews*

**Abstrak**—Perbedaan karakteristik pria dan wanita mempengaruhi pemilihan karakter bahasa yang berbeda antara pria dan wanita. Namun, meningkatnya keberadaan gender non-biner menantang kategorisasi bahasa yang kaku sebagai maskulin atau feminin. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi fitur-fitur bahasa yang digunakan oleh Sam Smith sebagai individu non-biner dan pengaruh faktor sosial dalam pemilihannya. Data dalam penelitian ini dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan metode dokumentasi berupa ujaran-ujaran yang diucapkan oleh Sam Smith dalam dua wawancara di YouTube. Metode kualitatif deskriptif digunakan untuk menganalisis data dengan menggunakan teori fitur bahasa oleh Coates (2013) dan teori faktor sosial yang mempengaruhi penggunaan bahasa oleh Holmes (2013). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Sam Smith menggunakan ketujuh jenis fitur bahasa dalam wawancara dengan pewawancara laki-laki. Sementara, dengan pewawancara perempuan, hanya enam jenis fitur bahasa yang digunakan, dimana fitur perintah dan arahan tidak ditemukan. Penelitian ini lebih lanjut mengungkapkan bahwa terdapat perbedaan frekuensi fitur bahasa yang digunakan dalam dua wawancara tersebut, yang dipengaruhi oleh faktor sosial, termasuk partisipan, latar, topik, dan fungsi.

**Kata Kunci:** *fitur bahasa, faktor sosial, gender non-biner, wawancara*

## 1. Introduction

Gender differences influence differences in language use between men and women. The different characteristics of men and women, as well as the rules formed by society regarding how men and women express themselves, affect the selection of different language characters between men and women (Akbar, 2019, p. 2). The differences in language use between men and women have been widely discussed in sociolinguistic studies. Sociolinguistic studies show that types of social structures, cultural backgrounds, and pragmatic mentalities, such as the social gender phenomenon, lead to differences in language use between men and women in society (Alwi & Irwandi, 2022, p. 134). This gender-influenced difference in language use has led to theories about the language features used by men and women.

A study on language and gender was conducted by Lakoff (1973) in which ten women's language features were identified, including lexical hedges, tag questions, empty adjectives, precise color terms, hypercorrect grammar, rising intonation on declaratives, intensifiers, super polite, avoidance of strong swear words, and emphatic stress. Coates (2013) further discussed that women and men use different types of language features. She stated that men use commands and directives, and swearing and taboo language more often, while women generally use hedges, minimal responses, tag questions, questions, and compliments more often. These studies show significant differences between the language features of men and women. Men are described as speaking more assertively, maturely, and to the point, whereas women speak less assertively, less overtly, often use more refined language, and are expected to speak more politely than men (Aini, 2023, p. 2).

In certain cases, male and female language features are not always indicated for the respective gender. A study conducted by Safitri (2022) showed that men can use female language features, and so can women. Another case of deviant use of language features was found in non-binary gender.

Genderqueer or non-binary gender is a term for gender identity that does not refer to one specific gender, such as female or male, instead it can be in between or outside of both genders (Kertati, *et al.*, 2023, p. 1714). Data on language use among non-binary people is still rare, but some research shows differences in language use among non-binary individuals. Research conducted by Mirabella *et al.* (2024) reported that some non-binary individuals used pronouns that symbolized feminine and masculine alternately, while others used new linguistic forms to symbolize non-binary gender. Cordoba (2023, p. 67) further revealed that most non-binary individuals prefer to use gender-neutral language, such as using the pronoun 'they', using 'Mx' for titles, and others that best reflect their gender. This shows that the language of non-binary people reflects gender fluidity that challenges the rigid categorization of language as masculine or feminine.

Non-binary gender issues are receiving greater attention in contemporary society. A study conducted by Richards *et al.* (2016) shows that the prevalence of adolescents who identify as non-binary gender is increasing over the years. One public figure who declared their non-binary identity is Sam Smith, a famous British singer and songwriter. This drew great attention from the public, as there were differences in Sam Smith's body language and speech after his declaration as a non-binary individual. This change was especially noticeable in the interviews that Sam Smith participated in. As Coates (2013, p. 98) stated, speakers accommodate to the perceived norms of the other gender in mixed-gender conversation. Through the interviews, it can be observed how Sam Smith, as a non-binary gender figure, uses both men's and women's language features simultaneously, which can also be influenced by the interviewer's gender.

This study is conducted to identify and analyze the language features used by Sam Smith as a non-binary individual and the influence of social factors in Sam Smith's selection of language features. Research on language features of non-

binary gender in Sam Smith's interviews is interesting to discuss in order to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and gender. This further reveals how non-binary individuals use both language features, men and women language features when interacting with both men and women.

## 2. Research Method

The data in this study were taken from Sam Smith's interviews that were published on two different YouTube channels. The first data was taken from the Apple Music YouTube channel with the headline "Sam Smith: New Album 'Gloria', SNL & Creating 'Unholy'" released in 2023. Meanwhile, the second data was taken from the Amazon Music YouTube channel with the headline "Sam Smith Talks about New Music and More with Julie Adenuga" released in 2020. The two interviews discussed Sam Smith's life, his new album, and other matters related to his career as a singer. Two data from different sources are used to observe whether there are differences in Sam Smith's language features when conducting interviews with a male interviewer in the Apple Music interview and with a female interviewer in the Amazon Music interview.

This study applied the documentation method with a note-taking technique in collecting the data. According to Sugiyono (2015), documentation is a data collection method in which data and information are obtained through existing documents that can support the study. The data were in the form of utterances uttered by Sam Smith in two interviews. Data were first gathered by watching and listening intensively to Sam Smith's interviews on Apple Music and Amazon Music YouTube Channels numerous times to gain a deeper understanding of the interview context. Important information was noted by focusing on Sam Smith's utterances, which were then classified into language features proposed by Coates (2013).

The descriptive qualitative method was used to analyze the data. Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative research data is presented in the

form of words or images. The technique used to analyze the data was the data reduction technique. The data reduction technique is a technique that is used to limit the data set to items that are relevant to a particular analysis (Guest *et al.,* 2012). The data collected were analyzed based on the theory of language features proposed by Coates (2013) and the theory of social factors that influence language use proposed by Holmes (2013).

The data were then presented using formal and informal methods. In the formal method, the analysis is presented in the form of tables, diagrams, or symbols, while in the informal method, the analysis is presented in textual form or verbal explanation using sentences (Sudaryanto, 1993). In this study, the formal method is used to present the total frequency of each language feature found in the two Sam Smith interviews. Meanwhile, the informal method is used to interpret the data and describe the results of the analysis through sentences.

## 3. Results and Discussion
### 3.1 Language Features Used by Sam Smith in YouTube Interviews

In the interview with Zane Lowe, a male interviewer in the Apple Music Interview, Sam Smith used all seven types of language features, including minimal responses, hedges, tag questions, questions, commands and directives, swearing and taboo language, and compliments. Meanwhile, with Julie Adenuga, the female interviewer in the Amazon Music Interview, Sam Smith only used six of the seven language features, excluding commands and directives.

### 1. Minimal Responses
Data 1
Zane : She's one of the most talented writers.
Sam : **Yeah.**
Zane : An incredible performer, and just carries herself in such an excellent way.
Sam : **Yeah.**

(Apple Music Interview, 2023, 27:37)

In the conversation above, Zane and Sam were talking about Jessie, a songwriter who has worked with Sam on his albums, and praised her ability. Minimal responses, such as 'yeah', were uttered by Sam with certainty, which validates Zane's statement. This shows that Sam used minimal responses to show support by actively listening to what Zane said, even though the responses were short. This use of minimal responses is in line with the female language feature. Women use minimal responses to show support, while men often use it to interrupt the speaker (Coates, 2013, p. 192).

Data 2

Julie : We're not going to talk about it on camera,

Sam : **Yes.**

Julie : But you can tell people about that in your own time.

Sam : **Of course**.

(Amazon Music Interview, 2020, 01:06)

In this conversation, Julie informed Sam that she would not bring up the topic outside of the interview and allowed Sam to talk about it at another time outside of the interview. Sam listened to Julie's speech with great attention and responded with 'yes' and 'of course', which indicated that he understood and agreed with what Julie was saying. As Coates (2013, p. 123) stated, minimal responses such as 'yeah' signal active attention, and this function tends to be used by women. In accordance with Coates' statement, in this data, Sam Smith used minimal responses that align with women's language features.

## 2. Hedges

Data 3

Sam : They just- and they don't- they're losing **um…** they don't have empathy, **you know**, they're a bit Psychopathic, **I think**.

(Apple Music Interview, 2023, 35:55)

In the conversation above, Sam talked about the person behind the making of the song "How to Cry" and described that person as someone who does not have empathy. The hedge 'um' was used by Sam as a short pause that indicates uncertainty and a search for words that can mitigate the judgmental statements. These statements were also followed by the hedges 'you know' and 'I think', which were used to engage the listener and protect the face of the speaker and the listener from the harsh claim. Coates (2013, p. 90) stated that hedges are used when talking about sensitive topics to protect both the speaker and the listener. The use of hedges in this conversation is aligned with women's linguistic features.

Data 4

Sam : I just had all my friends around me, and we- **I think** I had a mojito. **Just like** one or two.

(Amazon Music Interview, 2020, 13:59)

In this conversation, Sam recounted the moment with his friends during the making of the music video "Kids Again." Hedges such as 'I think' and 'just like' are used to show uncertainty. Sam was unsure of his memory and used hedges to avoid uncertain claims. Coates (2013, p. 88) stated that hedges are used to express uncertainty, and women use this feature more often. It can be said that Sam Smith in this interview used hedges that aligned with women's language features.

## 3. Tag Questions

Data 5

Sam : Sometimes it takes time, **doesn't it?** To realize that you've got greatness in your hands like that.

(Apple Music Interview, 2023, 28:35)

In the conversation above, Sam replied to Zane's statement that complimented Jessie's talent and achievements in her career. Sam used the tag question 'doesn't it?' that started with the reflective statement "Sometimes it takes time" to seek confirmation of his proposition. This use of tag question is speaker-oriented, which aligns with men's linguistic features. As Coates (2013, p. 91) said, tag questions that are speaker-oriented are used to ask the addressee to confirm the speaker's proposition.

Data 6
Sam  : It would be cool to open up a gay club, **right?**
(Amazon Music Interview, 2020, 04:23)

In this conversation, Julie asked Sam if he wanted to open a gay club. Sam then responded by using the tag question 'right?' instead of just replying with a statement. In this case, Sam used tag questions to include the listener in the conversation. This is aligned with the addressee-oriented function of tag questions. Tag questions that are addressee-oriented express the speaker's attitude towards the addressee with the aim of supporting the addressee or to soften the strength of negatively affective speech acts (Coates, 2013, p. 91). The use of this tag is aligned with the female linguistic feature function.

## 4. Questions
Data 7
Sam  : **Can you imagine what other kids like queer kids are feeling?** And it's just so sad like that we're in 2023 and it's still happening.
(Apple Music Interview, 2023, 22:10)

In the conversation above, Sam Smith talked about how people in the UK view non-binary genders. Sam then imagined how queer kids could cope with that by asking Zane a question. This question did not wait for the addressee to respond and function to invite other participants into the conversation. Coates (2013, p. 130) stated that questions function to invite other participants to join the conversation and check participants' views when used by women. In this case, Sam used women's language features in the use of questions, which is also because Zane has more "power" to ask questions that elicit information.

Data 8
Sam  : I love Charity Sue, Charity Shop Sue. **Have you ever seen Charity Shop Sue?**
(Amazon Music Interview, 2020, 15:40)

In this conversation, Sam Smith shared that he loves to see unique content created by the TikTok account Charity Shop Sue. Sam then asked Julie if she had ever watched her content. The question form is used by Sam in this conversation to get a response from the addressee and to include other participants in the conversation. This shows a cooperative form of conversation between Sam and Julie, which is in line with women's features. Questions are used by women to invite other participants in the conversation (Coates, 2013, p. 130).

## 5. Commands and Directives
Data 9
Sam  : Yeah, I mean, **don't move your hips. Don't, you know, talk about this that that**, but just like, **let's keep the focus on the voice.**
(Apple Music Interview, 2023, 07:08)

In the conversation above, Sam talked about the negative comments he received from the audience for wearing feminine outfits at his concerts. Sam used commands and directives, such as "Don't move your hips" and "Don't talk about this that that" to indirectly command the audience not to make negative comments. Sam then softened his use of commands and directives by saying, "Let's keep the focus on the voice." The command 'don't' in this conversation is an aggravated directive, while 'let's' is a mitigated directive. According to Coates (2013, p. 95), men tend to use aggravated directives, while women tend to use mitigated directives. This indicates Sam Smith used both male and female linguistic functions of commands and directives.

## 6. Swearing and Taboo Language
Data 10
Sam  : Because I'm **fucking up** in front of people. It is exhausting, and tiring, and scary.
(Apple Music Interview, 2023, 01:44)

In this conversation, Sam shared that at the beginning of his career, he found the rehearsal room a daunting place because he felt like he was messing up in front of people. Sam used the swear word 'fucking up' to describe his mess. This type of swearing belongs to the strong taboo, where this

word comes from the word 'fuck' which refers to a type of sexual profanity. The use of strong taboo in this conversation indicates men's linguistic features. Men use stronger swearing and taboo language than women (Coates, 2013, p. 97).

Data 11

Sam : If you are getting into the music industry as an artist then chances are that you're a little bit **fucked up** like me.

(Amazon Music Interview, 2020, 51:00)

In this conversation, Sam gave advice to someone who wants to get into the music industry to make sure that they are surrounded by good people. Sam shared that those who get into the music industry are likely to be a bit 'fucked up'. The word 'fucked up' here can be interpreted as a state of mental turmoil, which most artists in the music industry experience due to the pressure of work. This word is a strong taboo expression as it is derived from the word 'fuck', which refers to a type of sexual profanity. Similar to the previous analysis, the use of this type of swearing aligns with the male linguistic features.

## 7. Compliments

Data 12

Sam : Ed's ability to write music- **It's just beautiful. It's just so special.**

(Apple Music Interview, 2023, 37:55)

The conversation above shows Sam complimenting Ed Sheeran's ability to write music using phrases such as "It's just beautiful. It's just so special." This compliment is delivered with a focus on Ed's ability, not directly on Ed himself, which shows that Sam uses impersonal compliments. In addition, this compliment is shown to a person's ability, which shows the use of compliments in line with male language features. Men tend to use compliments that are impersonal and focused on possessions or skills (Coates, 2013, p. 99).

Data 13

Sam : **She's amazing on TikTok.** Yeah, **it's amazing. I love- I love it.**

(Amazon Music Interview, 2020, 15:48)

In this conversation, Sam complimented Charity Shop Sue by saying, "She's amazing on TikTok." This compliment is personalized because it is directly addressed to the content creator, which aligns with the female language feature. In the following compliments, Sam used the compliments, "It's amazing," and "I love it," which are impersonal because they refer to the content created by Charity Shop Sue, not to herself. In the context of use, Sam's compliments are directed at skills that align with male language features. Women's compliments are personal and focused on appearance, whereas men's are impersonal and focused on skills (Coates, 2013, p. 99). In other words, Sam used both male and female features simultaneously in this conversation.

### 3.2 The Influence of Social Factors in the Selection of Language Features

The analysis of social factors was conducted by referring to the data analyzed in the previous subchapter. The analysis is also based on the frequency comparison of Sam Smith's use of language features in both interviews, as presented in the table below.

Table 1. Frequency of language features used in Sam Smith's interviews

| Features | Apple Music Interview (Male Interviewer) | Amazon Music Interview (Female Interviewer) |
|---|---|---|
| **Minimal Responses** | 19 | 16 |
| **Hedges** | 49 | 37 |
| **Tag Questions** | 5 | 1 |
| **Questions** | 1 | 8 |
| **Commands and Directives** | 2 | 0 |
| **Swearing and Taboo Language** | 5 | 2 |
| **Compliments** | 6 | 18 |

The table above shows that there are differences in the frequency of Sam Smith's use of language features in interviews with a male interviewer and a female interviewer. These differences were influenced by the four social factors, including participants, setting, topic, and function. The discussions are presented below.

### 1. Participants

The status and gender differences of the participants influenced Sam Smith's choice of language features. The status relationship of the participants in both data is between the interviewer and the interviewee. Holmes (2013, p. 9) stated that status or power is related to participant relationships and language choice. This influenced the minimum frequency of the tag questions used in both interviews and the minimum use of the questions feature in interviews with the male interviewer, as shown in Table 1.

In terms of gender differences, Sam Smith conducted interviews with a male interviewer in the first data and a female interviewer in the second data. Sam Smith, who is a non-binary individual, used male and female language features alternately in both interviews, which were influenced by the gender of the interviewer. As shown in Table 1, Sam Smith used more swearing and taboo language as well as commands and directives when speaking with the male interviewer, and used more question and compliment features with the female interviewer.

### 2. Setting

The level of formality of the setting influenced Sam Smith's choice of language features. In both data in this study, Sam Smith conducted conversations in a semi-formal interview setting. The interviews are conducted in a casual conversational style, but are still structured. The setting influenced Sam Smith's choice of language features that he wanted to present to the public.

The setting and participants factor are interrelated in this analysis. One of the examples of

the influence of the setting factor, which is also influenced by participants' gender, on the choice of language features is the minimal use of swearing and taboo language features in Sam Smith's interview with the female interviewer, as shown in Table 1. The female interviewer avoided using this feature as opposed to the female language features and used language appropriate to the semi-formal setting. This influenced Sam Smith to minimize the use of swearing and taboo language features in this interview.

### 3. Topic

In both data in this study, Sam Smith had similar topics that discussed Sam Smith's life, his new album, and other matters related to his career as a singer. The topic of gender was also found in both interviews, which influenced Sam Smith's language choice. The influence of this type of topic can be seen in the number of hedges used in both interviews. Sam Smith used a lot of hedges when talking about his gender or personal life. The sensitive topic influenced the use of hedges, where Sam tried to soften his speech and reduce the force of what he was trying to say. Coates (2013, p. 90) stated that conversations that raise sensitive topics affect the amount of hedges used by the speaker, which is intended to reduce the force of what is being said and protect the face of both the speaker and the listener.

### 4. Function

The function of interaction between Sam Smith and the interviewer in both interviews can include referential and affective functions. The referential function in Sam Smith's interaction is the delivery of information related to Sam and his new album to his fans. Meanwhile, the affective function is more highlighted because Sam Smith's interactions connect more emotional feelings through his personal stories. Holmes (2013, p. 449) stated that affective functions are emphasized by women in casual interactions more than referential functions. This influenced how Sam Smith employed language features that aligned in purpose

with women's language features in both interviews, as seen in the use of minimal responses, hedges, and questions.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that in the interview with the male interviewer in the Apple Music Interview, Sam Smith used all seven types of language features. These language features include minimal responses with 19 utterances, hedges with 49 utterances, tag questions with 5 utterances, questions with 1 utterance, commands and directives with 2 utterances, swearing and taboo language with 5 utterances, and compliments with 6 utterances. Meanwhile, with the female interviewer on Amazon Music Interview, Sam Smith only used six out of seven language features. These language features include minimal responses with 16 utterances, hedges with 37 utterances, tag questions with 1 utterance, questions with 8 utterances, swearing and taboo language with 2 utterances, and compliments with 18 utterances. The commands and directives features were not found in any of Sam Smith's utterances in the Amazon Music Interview.

The research further revealed that in the interview with the male interviewer, Sam Smith adopted both male and female language features. Male language features were found in the use of tag questions, commands and directives, and swearing and taboo language, while female language features were found in the use of minimal responses, hedges, and questions, and compliments which used a combination of male and female features. On the other hand, Sam Smith, on the whole, used female language features when conducting interviews with female interviewers. The difference in the selection of these language features is influenced by four social factors, including participants, setting, topic, and function.

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