

TITLE: Game Show Sociolinguistics: A Diachronic Investigation of Gender and Negotiation in “The Pyramid”

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Among the many variables that research in sociolinguistics attempts to identify and explain, linguistic variation across gender and time are two prominent dimensions that provide rich sources of data. Researchers typically rely on observational, corpus-derived, and data gathered from studies to hypothesize how language differs across these dimensions. A source of observational data that has largely been overlooked in academia is found in game shows. This study will analyze linguistic phenomena that occur in a particular game show that has captured audiences around the world for several decades: “The Pyramid”. Contestants in this show work in pairs to negotiate for meaning. One partner must employ a variety of linguistic cues, such as description, body language, call and response, and collocations, to implicitly convey a word to the other partner, who must guess accurately as many words out of seven in 30 seconds.

The data gathered for this project came from 30 episodes from the 1980s American edition found on the web and 30 episodes of the current edition that have been pre-recorded. Throughout this study, after mechanisms by which pairs negotiate words have been clearly identified, each response will be classified into categories, and then graded based on success. The participants in this study, the contestants, can be classified into three groups based on gender: male-female, male-male, and female-female. In summary, the primary purpose of this study is to discover if there are any salient differences in the quantity and type of means that partners from these groups use to negotiate for meaning. The findings from this study will build upon research on gendered aspects of communication. Differences in cross-gender communication which illuminated through this study can be taken into consideration in the classroom, improving pedagogy. Furthermore, the results allow for better understanding of how communication between individuals in the USA has changed since the 1980s and support hypotheses on the cause of these changes, if any of significance are found to exist at all.