Gossip in "Big Little Lies"; a Sociolinguistic study

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Abstract

Gossip is a linguistic phenomenon that almost appears in our daily conversations. In the present research paper, gossip in big little lies by Liane Moraity is discussed following in the steps of Deborah Johnes (1980) in identifying the four basic functional types of gossip, Foster's (2004) functions of using gossips and Coates (1997) theories regarding the difference between men and women talk.

The study aims at exploring the most common situations in which gossips are used, the relationship between people gossiping, the difference between the way and the frequency men and women gossip. It also aims at analyzing types, functions and linguistic features of gossips used in the literary work under investigation. Different examples from various male and female characters are analyzed to reach the conclusions that; women gossip more than men and that there are specific linguistic features that each sex tends to use more than others. The purpose why each gender sex is also different as proved below.

Keywords: Gossip; sociolinguistics; function; gender; linguistic feature; literature.

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2. Introduction:

According to (Simpson et al., 1989), the word "gossip" once meant a "godmother" or "godfather. It came from the Old English "godsibb", which had the same meaning. By the late 14th century, the word also meant a familiar acquaintance, friend, or chum, and in the 1600s, it referred to "a woman's female friends invited to be present at a birth." Around the same time or slightly earlier, *gossip* gained the familiar meaning of someone who "delights in idle talk" while the term came to refer to idle talk itself around 1811.

According to Eggins & Slade (1997) gossip is a form of talk usually associated with women. They also believe that gossip is also often used by men to denigrate women's talk. Despite some people's denial, a gossip is a form of talk that most, perhaps all of us engage in, to differing degrees and in different contexts.

Consider the following example:

Tom suddenly put his hand on Jane's arm. "Oh my God." "What?" said Jane. He was looking out to sea as if he'd seen something.

"I think I'm getting a message. "He put a finger to his temple. "Yes! Yes, I am. It's from Victor!" "Victor?" "Victor Berg, who loved to walk around this headland!" said

Tom impatiently. He jabbed a finger at the plaque. "Vic, mate, what is it?"

The act of gossip above is an example of a scandal type of gossip in which the speaker "Tom" is providing information about another character. The repetition of "yes" is used to confirm what the speakers thought about and it is considered a meaningless particle. The function of that gossip is mainly to provide the addressee with some information regarding a character he seems not to remember at the moment of the conversation.

3. Previous Studies on Gossip and literature

Various researchers tackled the issue of gossip and gender stressing the conclusion that women often gossip much more than men do.

Graddol and Swann (1989, 1993) believe that women are more cooperative than men in conversation. They discuss that in relation to their use of gossip. They point out that women's use of a cooperative style gives the impression that women are hesitant and their language is not taken seriously. Women's gossip focuses on personal experiences, relationships, problems, and feelings.

Coates (2004:86) concludes that women usually talk for their own enjoyment and the conversational floor is potentially

open to all the people simultaneously. Moreover, women are more inclined to use a way of talking that is available to all participants. However, Coates (2004) argues that men's gossip displays more competitive features: they want to dominate the talk and compete for grabbing the floor. Men prefer a more adversarial style and they pursue their own purpose without considering the others. Conversations with long monologues give them privileged access to the floor. The topics men discuss tend to focus on things, activities, information and facts, rather than personal experiences and feelings (Holmes, 2001: 298).

Friendship and gossip is also another issue discussed by Jaeger et al. (1994) who concluded that there is a tight relationship between gossip and friendship and the difference in gender is also an important factor that is evident in the types and functions of gossip acts used.

Abukruuz and Al-Hindawy (2016) were interested in discussing the pragmatics of gossip. They used some of Jane Austin's novels as their source of data. They reached the conclusion that the pragmatic structure of gossip is composed of a speech act, a presupposition, conversational implicatures, and politeness and that there is a strong relationship between the pragmatic strategies employed in

achieving gossip and some of the major themes in the novels they investigated.

4. Methodology and Procedure:

The present research is a qualitative one in which the following steps were used analyzing the data collected:

First: A literary work which has not been analyzed from the same prospective before has been chosen.

Second: The literary work has been read more than once to discover the situations in which gossip appears.

Third: Conversations that manifest that act is highlighted and analyzed.

4.1. Data and Analysis

In analyzing the data which are used in the study, the following steps are followed:

1. Speakers are identified to highlight the difference between male and female talk.
2. The contexts in which gossips are used are briefly summarized.
3. The type of each gossip is provided.
4. The function of each gossip is highlighted.
5. Main linguistic features of gossips are explained.

4.2. Research Questions:

The study aims at answering the following questions:

1- What is the relationship between gossip and literature?

2- What is the relationship between gossip and gender?

3- What are the linguistic features of gossip?

4- What are the differences in women and men gossip in 'big little lies'?

5- What is the function of gossip?

6- Which speech features are used frequently in 'big little lies'?

4.3. Research Limitations:

The present research is only assigned to explore the difference between women and men gossip in 'little big lies'. It sheds light on the linguistic features, types and function of gossip. The study is only confined to Liane Moriarty's novel "big little lies".

5. Theoretical Framework:

Throughout the study, some relevant theories were used:

5.1.   Deborah Johnes's theory (1980)

According to Jones (1980) in "women notes", there are four distinct functional types of gossip; house-talk, scandal, bitching and chatting.

a. House Talk:

people are mainly focused on exchanging information. When women choose that type of gossip they are probably exchanging recipes, household hints and dress patterns. It might also   include discussing other certain issues that women find interesting such as ; techniques to catch a husband, or bringing up a child. That kind of talk is basically informal, emotional and intimate.

b. Scandal:

In which the gossiper is usually making some sort of judgment regarding the life, behavior or character of another person. That kind of gossip is an evidence of the concern people especially women have regarding each other's life.

c. Bitching:

 Bitching reveals the anger or dissatisfaction women might have regarding their restricted role and inferior status. Such feeling is expressed among women only.

(d) Chatting:

Chatting is the most intimate form of gossip, in which people exchange their own skills, interests and experiences

5.2. Robert Foster(2004)

Foster (2004) states that there are four basic functions of gossip

a)To provide information:

gossip is known as one of the techniques through which people exchange information or as Foster (2004:85) calls it a sort of tally sheet for public opinion.

b) To give entertainment:

Like the majority of forms of storytelling, gossip could be only used for fun and amusement. Foster (2004: 85) said that the gossipee might certainly be sensitive about the information being passed.

This does not contradict the fact that gossip can exist solely for the entertainment or recreational value of the gossipers though. It is the sheer fun which for most gossipers explains their involvement.

c) To enhance friendship:

According to Foster's theory (2004: 87), gossip is strongly related to friendship as it has an important role in building and enhancing relationships through a friendship or intimacy function.

d) To influence others:

Gossip is recognized as efficient social mechanism through which people influence and get to know each other.

5.3.   <u>Jennifer Coates (1997, 2004)</u>

Gossip appears to be a phenomenon related closely to females. Coates (1997) was mainly interested in highlighting the differences between men and women talk aiming at revaluing women's talk which was characterized by powerlessness by early work on women's language. Coates was able to manifest that women's talk is actually highly positive. She found that the conversations she analyzed were characterized by cooperation, with women concerned to support one another's contributions rather competitions and manifesting one's power over the other.

In some feminist criticism, gossip is nearly synonymous with women's talk‖ in general or girl talk just like Foster (2004) tends to talk about gossip as a way of women talking to each other.

Gossip is often seen as a women's feature (Coates 2004: 3) but still it is investigated. Coates also wanted to include a different point of view by claiming that gossip in

fact is used to destroy genders specific roles that are attached to women. Studies have shown that women tend to be more polite and hypercorrect with their linguistic behavior (Coates 2004: 62).

5.4. Robin Lakoff (1975):

Lakoff identifies ten basic linguistic features through which the researcher identified the various linguistic features of gossips in the literary work under discussion.

1. Tag questions:

Robin Lakoff's claims that women use tag questions in more conversational situations than do men and that such questions signify an avoidance of commitment, causing the speaker 'to give the impression of not being really sure of himself, of looking to the addressee for confirmation, even of having no views of his own'. They find that in an at least one genuine social context, men did, and women did not, use tag questions, both formal and informal, so the claim is open to serious doubt

2. Intensifiers:

Intensifiers are a common linguistic features used by the female choristers in "big Little Lies". The main purpose of their use of intensifiers is to emphasize or strengthen what they say in an attempt to attract the attention of addressees.

3. Hyper correct grammar:

hypercorrect grammar did not occur in this research because the female characters mostly used informal language in their dialogue to shorten the gap.

4. Standard forms or super polite forms:

In a few limited situations in the work under discussion particularly at school meetings, a few standard and polite forms were used.

5. Emphatic stress:

Emphatic stress is a term to emphasize the most important word in a speaker's statement Lakoff, (1975). Emphatic stress is women's greater pitch of range.

6. Lexical hedges:

Hedges are a type of verbal filler items which reduce the force of an utterance. Verbal fillers are used when speaker fills in a silence of their conversations. Lakoff (1975) differentiates four types of hedges. The first type is to express uncertainty such as, you know, well, kinda/kind of. The second type is hedges that are used for the sake of politeness such as sorta/sort of. The next type is to express that the speaker is certain about the truth of a statement to attach the attention of the listener, for example you know.

The last type is the type that is a preface to declarations or questions, for example, I guess, I wonder, I think

7. Rising intonation on declaratives:

Rising intonation on declaratives is used when the speaker seeks for confirmation, though at the same time the speaker may be the only one who has the requisite information. That feature wasn't touched upon in the literary work because it should be better discussed in the corresponding movie

8. Empty adjectives:

Women convey their emotional reaction rather than give specific information by using empty adjectives. Lakoff (1975) suggests that many adjectives used in expressing approval or admiration is strongly marked as feminine. Some of the adjectives are neutral such as great, terrific, cool and neat, but some of them are confined to women's speech or called special adjectives such as adorable, charming, sweet, lovely, and divine. Those kinds of adjectives appear a lot in the course of the novel.

9. Precise color terms:

Lakoff (1975) states that women have more vocabulary about colors more than men, for example, mauve turquoise, mustard, etc. Women use the precise color terms because it is related to their specific interest.

10. Avoiding swear forms:

Swearing is considered as an expression of very strong emotion due to particular condition the speaker like or dislike. Swearing is kind of interjection that can express extreme statements. Lakoff said that women are not supposed to talk rough. Women tend to avoid using swear words because they will consider them as unladylike.

6. Acts of Gossip in "Big Little Lies"

Situation (1)

Madeline**:** "You'll definitely be one of the younger kindergarten mums"… "(1) **You're even younger than my ex-husband's delightful new wife. Promise me you won't make friends with her, will you? I got you first.**"

Jane: I'm sure I won't even meet her.

Madeline: "Oh, you will…"**Her daughter is starting kindergarten at the same time as Chloe.** "The kindy mums will all have coffee**, (2) and there will be my ex-husband's wife sitting across the table, sipping her herbal tea …Bonnie even kisses me hello. She's into yoga and chakras and all that shit.**(Moriarty, 2014:p.31)

	Gossip Type	Gossip Function	Speech feature
1	Scandal	To enhance friendship	Tag Question & Neutral words
2	Bitching	To provide information	Neutral words

Illustration:

In the first part of the conversation above two different kinds of gossips can be noticed; the first one is the scandal type, in which the speaker is judging the character she is talking about, The main purpose of it is to get closer to the addressee and the main speech features are the tag question "will you" and "delightful".

In the second part, the speaker is actually expressing some sort of anger, envy and dissatisfaction towards the woman she is talking about. She is mainly gossiping in an attempt to provide the addressee with some information and again using neutral words is obvious showing the woman's inner feelings.

Situation (2)

Madeline: "**So**, school politics, girls," …"**We'll start at the top with the Blond Bobs.**"

Celeste: "The Blond Bobs?" (Celeste squinted, as if there were going to be a test afterward.)

Madeline: "(1) **The Blond Bobs rule the school. If you want to be on the PTA, you have to have a blond bob**," (She demonstrated the required haircut with her hand.) "It's like a bylaw."

(Jane chortled, a dry little chuckle, and Madeline found herself desperate to make her laugh again)

Madeline: "(2) **It shouldn't be peroxide blond, obviously; it should be expensive blond, and then you get it cut in that sort of 'mum' haircut, where it's like a helmet."**

Celeste: "**You're being mean**

Madeline: "I'm not!" protested Madeline. "I love that hairstyle! I told Lucy Ponder when I'm ready to run for the PTA she can give me the approved blond bob." (Moriarty, 2014:p.35)

	Gossip Type	Gossip Function	Speech feature
1	bitching	To make social comparison	meaningless particles
2	Scandal	To provide information	Neutral words

Illustration:

The example above presents two man types of gossip; bitching since the speaker is not satisfied with the rules of school and scandal in which the speaker is being judgmental

towards a specific class of girls judging them by appearance. The main functions of the two gossip is types are to make social comparison drawing a comparison between two classes of girls determine that only one class is going to have access to the PTA and also to give information about that rich class.

Situation (3)

Madeline: "Silly little idiots,"

(She said out loud as the car weaved dangerously into the next lane.)

Chloe: **"Who is an idiot?"**

Madeline: "**The girl driving the car in front of me is an idiot because she's driving her car and using her phone at the same time.** (Moriarty, 2014:p.18)

	Gossip Type	Gossip Function	Speech feature
1	bitching	To influence others	Requisite Information

 Illustration:

The example presents the bitching type of gossip, Madeline's words are obviously judging the behavior of this girl driving the other car claiming that younger generations have no respect to rules and she complains about their irresponsibility.

The speech features presented in Chloe's first line **"Who is an idiot?",** is a requisite information as the listener wants to have confirmation in the speech. The function of gossip here is to influence others as the speaker wishes as if she can control the action of this young girl or to advise her young daughter about the dangerous of driving and using phone at the same time.

Situation (4)

Madeline: "My friend Celeste will be here soon……. "You might have seen her at the school, dropping off her boys. (1)**Two little blond ruffians. She's tall, blond, beautiful and flustered."**

Jane : "**I don't think so," …. (2)"What's she got to be flustered about if she's tall, blond and beautiful?"**

Madeline: "Exactly," (as if that answered the question) "(3)**She's got this equally gorgeous, rich husband too. They still hold hands. And he's nice. He buys me presents.**

 Honestly, I (4) **have no idea why I stay friends with her." She looked at her watch. "Oh, she's hopeless. Always late!**(Moriarty, 2014:p.27)

	Gossip Type	Gossip Function	Speech feature
1	Chatting	To enhance friendship	Neutral words
2	Scandal	To provide information	Requisite information
3	House talk	To make social comparison	Neutral words
4	Bitching	To provide information	Meaningless particles

Illustration:

The conversation starts with "Madeline" trying to break the ice and get to know Jane. The latter shows her refusal to the fact that the character they are talking about might be flustered judging her on the looks Madeline has already described. Gossip types in the situation above vary from chatting in which the speaker and a listener are just chatting and exchanging information regarding another mom that the earlier knows. The functions of using these kinds of gossips are enhancing friendship, providing information and also making social comparisons between the girl they are gossiping about and themselves.

The use of words favored by women is clear from choices such as flustered, ruffians, and gorgeous. The use of question there was for getting more information regarding the topic they are talking about.

Situation (5)

Madeline: "I think you and the boys should come too. In case we run out of things to say."

Celeste : **"(1)Right,**…. "Thanks so much. A play date with the little boy who—"

Madeline: "Yes, yes. "**The little strangler**. But you know, **our kids aren't exactly shrinking violets."**

Celeste : **"I actually met the victim's mother yesterday when we were getting the boys' uniforms**. "Renata. **She's telling her daughter to avoid having anything to do with Ziggy and she suggested I tell my boys the same."**

Madeline : (Madeline's hand tightened on the phone) "She had no right to tell you that!"

Celeste : "I think she was just concerned—"

Madeline : **"You can't blacklist a child before he's even started school!"**

Celeste: "Well, I don't know, you can sort of understand, from her point of view. I mean, if that happened to Chloe, I mean, I guess . . ."

Gossip Type		Gossip Function	Speech feature
1	Scandal	To influence others	Meaningless particles
	Bitching	To influence others	Requisite information

Illustration:

"Madeline" in the conversation above is doesn't accept the attitude of the other women (Amabella's mother) toward the little boy and judging her behavior. She is also expressing her anger towards that Mom using the Bitching type of gossip.

The speech feature in those two types are meaningless particles which are clear in Celeste's first line "**Right,**" to show that she is hesitant about accepting this invitation because of Jane's son. Also in her last line "**I mean, I guess...**" Which are also used to reflect her hesitation about her reaction if she has been through the same situation. The second feature is **requisite information** which is clear in Madeline's last line **""You can't blacklist a child before he's even started school!"** as the speaker wants to give the listener the decision in the speech and get to know whether she is with or against her point of view.

6.   Findings and Conclusion:

This research was able to conclude the followings:

First: There is a tight relationship between the act of gossip and literature. In almost every literary work, gossips do not only appear but in some cases the entire plot is built upon it.

Second: when women are interacting with other women, they tend to gossip more unlike men who tend to gossip less especially in the presence of other men

Third: When men gossip, the majority of their gossips is about the other sex while women do the opposite gossiping about other women just as much as they gossip about men.

Fourth: There is an obvious difference between the linguistic features men and women use while gossiping. Because each of them tends to use a different language even if they have social, cultural and educational backgrounds in common.

In women's conversations, it has been noticed that they tend to use meaningless particles as well as empty adjectives and natural words, lexical fillers are also used extensively Tag questions and intensifiers are used less than the other linguistic features. Super polite forms are used in a few occasions.

In men's conversations, swear words expressing strong

feelings and emotions are the most linguistic feature that appears widely in the course of the novel. They tend to paraphrase and they tend to be competitive. They pay attention to their grammar more than women do.

In big little lies, the researcher was able to prove that women gossip as much as women do even if they don't do with same frequency. They use different styles doing so and their purposes are also not the same. Women are also known to be supportive preferring to gossip about private issues while men are known to be competitive tending to gossip about a rather general subject.

The act of gossip in "pig little lies" was mainly used by the different characters as a tool to gain acceptance in a certain social group, because gossip is considered an effective way that shows loyalty, sincerity and adherence to group norms. It was also used just for entertainment, for storytelling and transmitting information.

6.1.   Facts and Numbers:

Throughout the novel, the researcher analyzed the gossips of the three female and three male characters of the novels to prove the hypothesis of the plan.

The three main female characters were; Madeline, Celeste and Jane.

The three main male characters were; Nathan, Ed and Perry. Madeline participated in different conversations 965 times, 459 were gossips. Celeste talked about 519 times and only 158 times from them were gossips. Jane led 798 conversations among which 268 were gossips. As for men, Ed had 261 conversations and 100 of them were gossips just like Nathan who had 143 conversations and gossiped 53 times. Perry had 366 conversations, 55 of them were gossips.

These facts draw the fallowing conclusions:

Madeline participated with 42%, Jane 25%, and Celeste 14% gossips.

Perry and Nathan gossiped 5% and Ed 9% from the total. Figure (1)

The final conclusion drew from the previous data is that men participated approximately with one fourth of the percentage of gossips while women had the big share of gossips. Figure (2)
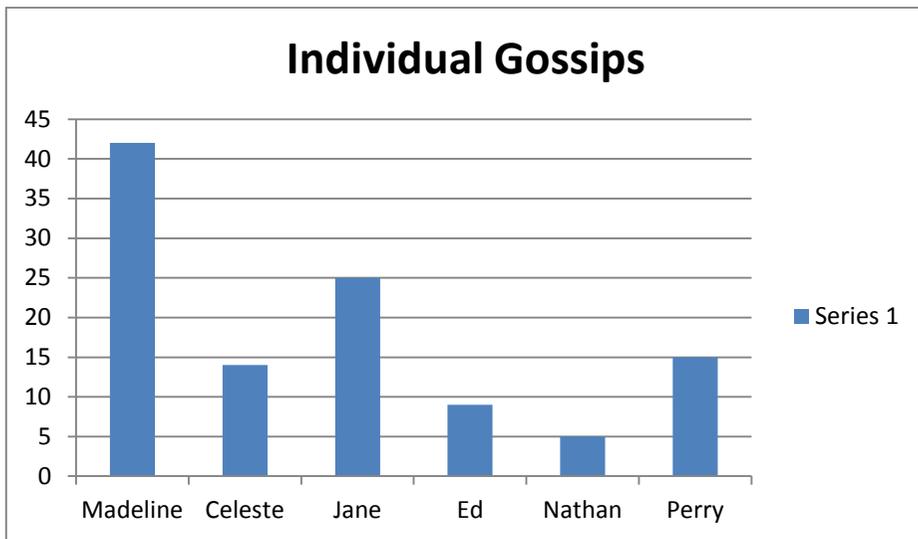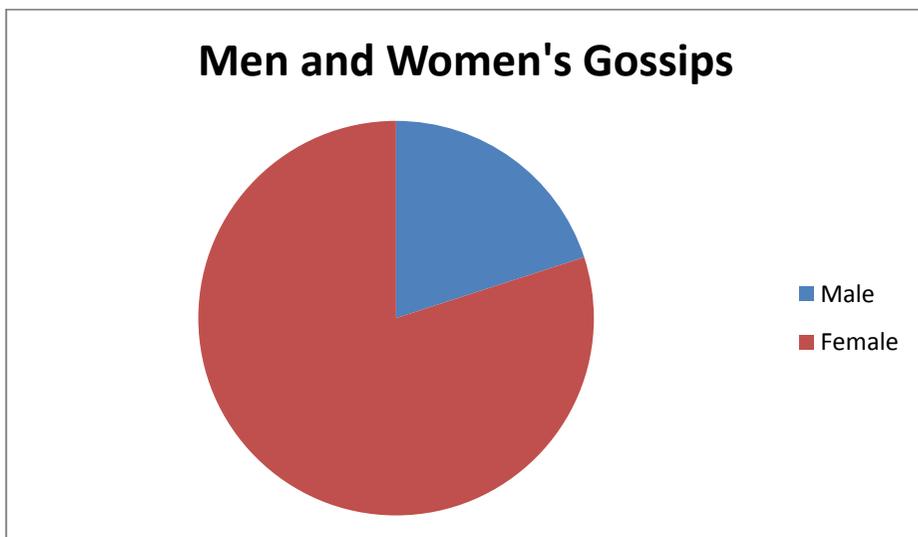
Figure (1)

Figure (2)

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ملخص

تهدف الدراسه الحاليه الي دراسه ضاهره لغويه تعرف ب "الثرثره" أو كما هو معتاد الاشاره اليها "القيل والقال". تعتبر هذه الظاهره من أهم الظواهر اللغويه الني نستخدمها تقؤيبا بشكل يومي في جميع محادثاتنا. تهتم الدراسه بدراسه هذه الظاهره في روايه أدبيه للكاتبه ليان موريارتي حيث يقوم الباحث باستخراج المواقف التي تظهر فيها هذه الظاهره مع توضيح القائل و لمن بغرض توضيح الفرق بين الطريقه التي يستخدم بها الرجال و النساء الظاهره تحت الدراسه و نوع التراكيب اللغويه و النحويه التي يتم استخدامها مع الاشاره الي الهدف من تلك الثرثره.

يستخلص الباحث من خلال تحليله للمواقف في الرايه ان الثرثره بين النساء تحدث ب شكل أكثر منها عند الرجال كما تلتزم النساء ببعض الاساليب و الكلمات اللتي تظهر في الغالب في معظم المواقف بينهم بالاضافه الي أن هدفهم من الثرثره و التحدث عن شخص غير موجود سواء بالحقيقه أو بذكر اشاعات عته تكون لأغراض معينه معظمها مختلف عن الأغراض الخاصه بالرجال.

تقوم الدراسه باستخراج مواقف النميمه أو الثرثره مع تلخيص بسيط للموقف الخاص ب كل منهم و تحديت النوع و الوظيفه و التركيب اللغوي الخاص ب كل تعبير و تنتهي الدراسه ل ترجمه جميع المستخلصات الي أرقام و رسوم يبانيه ل توضح ما انتهي اليه الباحث من خلال دراسته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثرثره– التحليل النحوي– المعني والدلاله– النوع و تأثيره.