

The Difference In Meaning Of “Flirting” In The Gender Mirror (Women And Men)

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Abstract

The urgency of this study lies in examining the gendered differences in the meaning of “flirting,” revealing how social norms and gender identity shape interpretation, with implications for linguistic and discourse analysis. Flirting is a common yet complex form of interpersonal communication that functions as a socially and linguistically mediated act. Although it is often treated as a universal behavior, previous studies demonstrate that the meaning and interpretation of flirting differ significantly across genders. His study aims to examine differences in the meaning of ‘flirting’ between men and women by positioning flirting as a speech act shaped by gender performativity, social context, and linguistic ambiguity. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using discourse analysis to explore how meaning is constructed in interaction. Data sources include prior empirical journal articles and discourse examples from both offline and online communication contexts. Data were collected through documentation and systematically selected based on relevance to the research focus. The analysis involved data reduction, categorization of linguistic features, and contextual interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied theoretical triangulation, repeated close reading, and peer debriefing to enhance credibility and reduce researcher bias. The findings reveal that men tend to interpret flirting as an explicit signal of romantic or sexual interest, while women more frequently understand it as a form of friendliness, relational bonding, or playful interaction. This divergence highlights a gap between dominant theoretical explanations and real-life communicative practices. The study contributes to flirting research by emphasizing language as the central mechanism through which flirtation is produced, negotiated, and misinterpreted. It also proposes that ambiguity is not a weakness of flirting, but its defining feature, allowing participants to manage desire, politeness, and social risk simultaneously.

Keywords: *Flirting, Gender, Speech Acts*

Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in shaping social interaction, particularly in expressing interpersonal intentions such as attraction, intimacy, and affection. One communicative practice that frequently involves such intentions is flirting. In everyday understanding, flirting is often defined as playful behavior intended to express romantic or sexual interest (Jonason & Perilloux, 2023). However, this seemingly simple definition fails to capture the complexity of how flirting is produced, interpreted, and negotiated in real interactions. Flirting is rarely explicit; instead, it relies on indirect language, implication, humor, tone, and contextual cues, making it a fertile ground for misunderstanding (Salsabila et al., 2024). Because meaning in flirting is highly dependent on shared assumptions, cultural norms, and situational contexts, the same utterance may be interpreted as flirtatious, friendly, or even inappropriate by different interlocutors

(Scharrer & Weckermann, 2025). Moreover, participants in a flirtatious exchange often maintain a level of ambiguity to manage social risk, allowing them to deny romantic intent if the interaction is not reciprocated. This strategic ambiguity highlights flirting not merely as an expression of desire, but as a dynamic communicative process in which speakers continuously negotiate intent, power, and social boundaries through language (Clarck et al., 2021; Manullang et al., 2026).

From a theoretical perspective, flirting has been explained through various frameworks. Views social interaction as performative, where individuals strategically manage impressions in everyday encounters. Further argues that gender itself is performative, repeatedly constructed through actions, including language use. In line with this view, flirting can be understood as a performative act in which speakers enact socially recognizable gender roles (Levitt et al., 2018). Sexual Script Theory also suggests that men and women are socialized into different expectations regarding romantic and sexual behavior, including how flirting should be initiated and interpreted (Li, 2025; Surbakti et al., 2025).

Despite these theoretical explanations, real-life interactions often reveal a significant gap between how flirting is conceptualized in theory and how it actually functions in practice. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate gender-based differences in the interpretation of flirtatious behavior. Men are more likely to perceive flirting as an indication of sexual or romantic interest, whereas women tend to interpret the same behaviors as expressions of friendliness, politeness, or social affiliation (Bagiński, 2025). This asymmetry in interpretation frequently results in miscommunication, emotional discomfort, or even interpersonal conflict. Such misunderstandings are not merely individual errors but reflect broader sociocultural expectations surrounding gender, desire, and communication norms (Lanaj et al., 2015; Suhardi, 2026).

In contemporary contexts particularly in digital communication environments where non-verbal and paralinguistic cues such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice are limited or absent this interpretative gap becomes even more pronounced. As a result, ambiguity in flirtatious communication is amplified, increasing the potential for misaligned intentions and reinforcing the need to examine flirting as a context-sensitive and interactionally negotiated phenomenon rather than a fixed or universally understood behavior (Dyer et al., 2019).

Recent studies on flirting have increasingly explored issues of gender roles, identity construction, and the influence of online communication contexts. However, many of these studies continue to prioritize observable behavioral patterns and psychological interpretations, often treating language as a secondary or transparent medium. As a result, the role of language itself specifically how lexical choices, pragmatic strategies, indirect speech acts, and implied meanings function to construct flirtation remains relatively underexplored. This tendency risks overlooking the subtle yet central ways in which flirtatious intent is linguistically produced, negotiated, and interpreted in interaction. Addressing this gap, the present study approaches flirting primarily as a linguistic phenomenon rather than merely a behavioral one, emphasizing how meaning is shaped through discourse, context, and interactional dynamics.

By foregrounding language use, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of flirting as a form of social action embedded in everyday communication (Pinsky, 2019). Based on this gap, the research questions of this study are: (1) How do men and women differ in interpreting the meaning of flirting? (2) How does language function as a tool that produces and sustains ambiguity in flirtatious interactions?

The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on flirting as a speech act shaped by gender performativity and linguistic ambiguity. Rather than treating flirting as a fixed set of behaviors or intentions, this study conceptualizes it as a dynamic communicative act through which speakers perform gendered identities and negotiate interpersonal meanings. By examining how ambiguity, indirectness, and pragmatic strategies are strategically employed in flirtatious discourse, this research bridges the gap between established theoretical models and the realities of everyday communication. In doing so, it offers a linguistically grounded perspective that integrates insights from pragmatics, discourse analysis, and gender theory, thereby contributing a more nuanced understanding of how flirting operates in real social interactions (Coy, 2016).

Flirting has been examined across multiple disciplines, including linguistics, communication studies, psychology, and gender studies, reflecting its complex and multifaceted nature as a social phenomenon. Within interpersonal communication theory, flirting is commonly conceptualized as a relational message that simultaneously expresses interest or attraction while preserving a degree of deniability. This strategic ambiguity allows interactants to manage social risk and maintain face in situations where romantic intent may not be reciprocated. Building on this perspective, demonstrates that miscommunication in flirting frequently arises because interlocutors attribute different intentions to the same verbal or behavioral cues.

Such findings underscore that meaning in flirtatious interaction is not inherent in specific actions or utterances but is instead co-constructed through interpretation, contextual knowledge, and social expectations. Consequently, flirting can be understood not as a transparent signal of desire, but as an interactional process in which meaning emerges through negotiation between participants (Bourabain, 2021). Extending this perspective, demonstrates that miscommunication in flirtatious interactions frequently arises when interlocutors attribute different intentions to the same verbal or behavioral cues. These findings highlight (Kozin, 2016).

Gender Role Theory, particularly Social Role Theory, further explains how traditional masculinity and femininity shape communicative practices. Extend this framework by showing that gender identity, gender ideology, and sexual orientation significantly affect flirting behavior. Their findings suggest that flirting cannot be fully understood through binary gender categories alone, but must account for socially constructed identities (Schneider, 2019).

From a performative perspective, gender is constituted through repeated acts, including linguistic choices (Eagly et al., 2019). In this sense, flirting becomes one of the arenas where gender is enacted and negotiated. Interaction theory complements this view by emphasizing that social actions are strategically designed. Framework to flirting, arguing that it is a deliberately ambiguous action that allows participants to express interest while avoiding accountability (Schmitt et al., 2016). Evolutionary approaches link flirting to mating strategies shaped by biological pressures. While these theories explain certain patterns, they tend to naturalize gender differences and overlook sociolinguistic variation. Studies on cyber-flirting further complicate this picture by demonstrating that although online flirting lacks physical presence, it reconstructs flirtatious meaning through text, emoticons, and symbols, while still reflecting traditional gender norms. Taken together, these studies highlight that flirting is shaped by gender, context, and social norms. However, they often treat language as a secondary component. This research builds on these theories by foregrounding linguistic form and speech strategies as the primary site where flirtation and gendered meaning intersect. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine how flirtation is linguistically constructed and negotiated through specific discourse strategies, and to analyze how these strategies reflect and reproduce gendered norms and power relations in both offline and online interactions

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research approach with a discourse-analytic orientation to explore flirting as a linguistic and social phenomenon embedded in everyday interaction. A qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate because the research prioritizes meaning, interpretation, and contextual understanding rather than quantification or statistical measurement. Through discourse analysis, the study closely examines linguistic features, interactional patterns, and situational contexts to capture the nuanced ways in which flirting is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted by participants.

Regarding the research setting, this study is not bound to a single specific geographical location, as it draws on documented examples of flirting from both offline and online communication contexts. The data consist of naturally occurring interactions and previously published discourse examples, making the study contextually diverse rather than site-specific. In terms of time frame, the research was conducted during the period of data compilation and analysis; however, the discourse data themselves are not limited to a particular year, as they represent recurring interactional practices across contemporary communication settings. Through this approach, flirting is understood not merely as a set of linguistic expressions, but as a dynamic communicative practice shaped by social norms, cultural expectations, interpersonal relationships, and evolving digital environments.

By emphasizing subjective experiences and socially embedded meanings, a qualitative design allows for a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of how flirting functions as a form of communication. However, this study does not involve direct human participants, as it does not collect primary data through interviews or field observation. Instead, it focuses on discourse as the primary unit of analysis, examining documented examples of flirtatious interactions from offline and online contexts. Within this framework, flirting is treated not merely as individual behavior, but as a socially constructed communicative practice manifested through language. The analysis centers on linguistic forms, interactional sequences, and contextual cues to reveal how meanings are negotiated and interpreted within specific social and cultural settings.

The data sources consist of documented findings from previous empirical journal studies on flirting and gender, observational examples of flirtatious interactions in everyday contexts, and discourse instances drawn from both face-to-face and digital communication, such as text messages and online chats. These data provide naturally occurring examples of how flirting is expressed, performed, and interpreted across different communicative settings. By incorporating multiple sources of data, the study captures variation in linguistic strategies, interactional cues, and gendered patterns of flirting, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of how meaning is negotiated in both offline and online environments.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis and non-participant observation. Document analysis involved the systematic review of relevant empirical studies and recorded discourse related to flirting and gender, while non-participant observation was used to examine naturally occurring flirtatious interactions without researcher involvement. The primary research instrument is a discourse analysis framework that examines flirtatious expressions as speech acts, with particular attention to features such as indirectness, ambiguity, and gendered interpretation. Field notes and selected discourse excerpts were then categorized according to the speaker's gender, interactional context, and perceived communicative intention to facilitate in-depth qualitative analysis.

For data analysis, this study applies discourse analysis combined with gender-based interpretive analysis. The analytical framework draws on Goffman's interaction theory and Butler's concept of gender performativity, enabling the researcher to examine how flirtatious language functions within social interactions and how gender is enacted through discourse. This framework allows for an in-depth interpretation of how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and contextualized in flirtatious exchanges, as well as how such language practices may reinforce, reproduce, or challenge prevailing gender norms within both face-to-face and digital communication contexts.

To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, the study employs theoretical triangulation by integrating multiple complementary perspectives—interaction theory and gender performativity to avoid reliance on a single analytical lens. In addition, interpretive validation is conducted through repeated close reading of the data and careful cross-checking between linguistic evidence and contextual interpretation to maintain analytical consistency. Peer discussion and academic consultation are also utilized to review coding categories and interpretations, thereby minimizing researcher bias and strengthening the credibility of the findings.

Results

Gendered Interpretation of Flirting as a Speech Act

The analysis shows a consistent gender-based difference in how flirtatious utterances are interpreted. Male participants tend to interpret flirtatious language as a direct indication of romantic or sexual interest. Compliments, playful teasing, or sustained attention are frequently understood as intentional signals of attraction. For example, an utterance such as “You’re really different from other girls” is often interpreted by male interlocutors as an explicit evaluative compliment that implies romantic interest. Linguistically, this utterance functions as an indirect expressive speech act that elevates the addressee while simultaneously positioning the speaker as emotionally invested. In contrast, women more frequently interpret similar utterances as expressions of politeness, friendliness, or general conversational engagement rather than as clear indicators of romantic interest. In many of the observed interactions, women reported perceiving such remarks as socially appropriate small talk or as communicative strategies aimed at maintaining harmony and rapport within interpersonal relationships. These interpretations suggest that women tend to rely more heavily on contextual cues and relational considerations when evaluating the intent behind flirtatious language.

This difference in interpretation reinforces claim that miscommunication in flirting arises not from shortcomings in linguistic form or clarity, but from divergent attributions of intent between speakers and listeners (Krendel, 2020). When identical utterances are assigned different meanings based on gendered expectations and social experience, the potential for misunderstanding becomes heightened. Consequently, flirting emerges as a communicative practice in which meaning is negotiated unevenly, shaped by individual perceptions, cultural norms, and assumptions about interpersonal intent.

Linguistic Ambiguity as a Core Feature of Flirting

The findings further reveal that ambiguity is not incidental but central to flirtatious communication. Flirting frequently employs indirect language, implicature, humor, and vague evaluative terms. Utterances such as “You’re funny haha” or “I like talking to you” operate on multiple pragmatic levels. They can be interpreted either as casual friendliness or as flirtation depending on contextual cues, relational history, and gender expectations.

This ambiguity allows speakers to maintain a degree of deniability while simultaneously testing relational boundaries within an interaction. By avoiding explicit statements of intent, speakers can gauge the other person's response without fully committing to a romantic or flirtatious stance. Such ambiguity serves an important social function, as it minimizes the risk of rejection or social discomfort while keeping the interaction open to multiple interpretations.

From a speech act perspective, flirtatious utterances often operate as indirect illocutionary acts, in which the intended meaning is not explicitly stated but implied through tone, context, and shared social knowledge. The perlocutionary effects of these utterances such as attraction, discomfort, or reciprocation depend heavily on how the hearer interprets the speaker's intent. This interpretation is shaped by contextual factors, interpersonal dynamics, and cultural expectations, supporting argument that flirting is inherently designed to be ambiguous and functions as a socially strategic form of communication (Hilte, 2022).

Offline and Online Flirting: Linguistic Continuity Across Contexts

The analysis indicates that online flirting mirrors offline flirting in function but differs in form. In digital contexts, linguistic symbols such as emojis, repeated punctuation, elongated spelling, and informal abbreviations replace non-verbal cues. For instance, messages such as "You're sooo nice" or "Miss you already hehe" serve as affective markers that signal intimacy without explicit declaration.

Despite the absence of physical presence in online interactions, traditional gender norms continue to shape patterns of flirtatious communication. Men tend to initiate contact in a more direct and explicit manner, positioning themselves as active pursuers, while women are more often placed in a responsive role. Moreover, women's flirtatious responses are frequently interpreted as sexualized or suggestive, even when the linguistic forms they use closely resemble polite, friendly expressions commonly employed in offline interactions. This suggests that interpretations of flirtation are not solely based on linguistic content, but are also influenced by gendered assumptions about intent and availability.

These findings align with the observation that cyber flirting reconstructs embodiment through language rather than physical cues, while simultaneously preserving established gendered expectations (Bapna et al., 2016). In the absence of visual and bodily signals, language becomes the primary medium through which desire, interest, and identity are communicated. However, rather than disrupting conventional norms, this linguistic embodiment often reproduces existing power dynamics and gender roles. As a result, online flirting emerges as a space where technological mediation reshapes interactional forms, yet continues to reflect broader social structures and inequalities related to gender.

Similarities and Differences with Previous Studies

This study shares similarities with previous research in acknowledging that flirting is gendered and context-dependent. The findings confirm that gender identity and social roles shape flirtation (Clark et al. 2021). However, this research differs by foregrounding linguistic form rather than behavioral frequency or psychological intention. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on the reasons why misunderstanding occurs, this research shifts attention to how misunderstanding is linguistically produced through the strategic use of ambiguity. The analysis demonstrates that ambiguity is not incidental, but is actively constructed through indirect expressions, implicit meanings, and context-dependent language choices that invite multiple interpretations. As a result, misunderstanding emerges as an inherent and predictable outcome of flirtatious interaction rather than a mere communicative breakdown.

The findings further suggest that flirting should be understood as a communicative strategy rather than a communicative problem. Through ambiguity, speakers are able to navigate interpersonal risk, test relational boundaries, and preserve social deniability. In this sense, the potential for misinterpretation is not a failure of communication, but a functional resource that allows flirting to operate effectively within complex social and relational contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study both support and extend existing theories of flirting. Traditional frameworks such as Sexual Script Theory and Gender Role Theory remain highly relevant in explaining why men and women approach flirtation differently, particularly in terms of initiation patterns, relational expectations, and the interpretation of flirtatious cues. These theories highlight how socially learned norms and gendered scripts shape individuals' communicative behavior, influencing who is expected to initiate flirtation, how interest should be expressed, and how such expressions are understood within interaction. However, within these traditional frameworks, misinterpretation in flirting is often conceptualized as a communicative failure or as a mismatch between intention and reception. Misunderstanding is typically framed as a problem to be avoided or corrected, implying that clearer or more direct communication would reduce ambiguity. Such perspectives tend to overlook the possibility that ambiguity itself may serve an important social function within flirtatious exchanges.

The present study challenges this assumption by demonstrating that misinterpretation in flirting is not accidental, but rather an expected and functional outcome of flirtatious interaction. Ambiguity allows participants to manage interpersonal risk, maintain deniability, and negotiate relational boundaries without overt commitment. By reframing misinterpretation as a strategic and productive element of flirtation, this study extends existing theories and suggests the need to reconceptualize flirting not as a site of communicative breakdown, but as a dynamic and socially strategic form of interaction.

This research proposes that flirting operates as a strategy of managed ambiguity, in which linguistic indeterminacy is not incidental but deliberately sustained. Through ambiguous wording, indirect expressions, and context-dependent cues, speakers are able to navigate multiple interactional goals at once, including the expression of desire, the maintenance of politeness, and the management of potential social risk. In this way, ambiguity becomes a communicative resource that allows flirtation to remain open-ended and adaptable to varying responses. Rather than seeking clarity or explicitness, flirtatious speakers intentionally maintain vagueness in order to preserve social flexibility and minimize communicative accountability. By avoiding direct statements of intent, speakers can retract, reinterpret, or reframe their utterances if the interaction does not unfold as anticipated. This strategic indeterminacy enables participants to test relational boundaries while protecting themselves from rejection, embarrassment, or social sanction.

This finding extends notion of designed ambiguity by grounding it explicitly in discourse-level linguistic analysis. The study demonstrates that ambiguity is not merely a conversational tactic employed opportunistically, but is structurally embedded within flirtatious speech acts themselves. At the level of discourse, flirtation is shown to rely on systematic patterns of indirectness and interpretive openness, reinforcing the view of flirting as a socially organized and linguistically patterned form of interaction.

Unlike prior research that primarily focuses on behavioral patterns or communicative Rather than locating meaning solely in individual intentions, this study demonstrates that language itself

constitutes the primary site of meaning-making in flirtatious interaction. Flirting operates through linguistic forms that are inherently open-ended, allowing speakers and hearers to collaboratively construct meaning within the interaction. In this sense, meaning does not precede communication, but emerges through the interpretive possibilities that language makes available.

Flirtatious interaction succeeds precisely because it allows multiple interpretations to coexist simultaneously. Utterances function effectively not by conveying fixed or determinate meanings, but by remaining strategically open to interpretation. This interpretive openness enables participants to explore and negotiate intimacy, interest, and relational alignment without requiring explicit commitment, thereby sustaining the social and interactional flexibility that characterizes flirtatious communication. Furthermore, the findings reveal a persistent gendered asymmetry in the interpretation of flirtatious language. Women's utterances are more likely to be sexualized or read as indicators of sexual availability, even when they are linguistically comparable to expressions of politeness or friendliness. In contrast, men's similar utterances are more often normalized and positively framed as signs of confidence, assertiveness, or charm. This unequal pattern of interpretation demonstrates that meaning in flirtation is not produced symmetrically, but is filtered through gendered expectations that assign different social values to men's and women's speech.

This asymmetry reflects broader power relations and dominant gender ideologies embedded in everyday language use, where women's communicative actions are subject to heightened scrutiny and sexualization. Such interpretive norms shape the outcomes of flirtatious interaction by constraining how women's intentions are understood and by granting men greater interpretive latitude. Existing theories of flirting have not sufficiently accounted for how these unequal interpretive frameworks operate at the level of discourse, nor how they systematically influence communicative outcomes. By foregrounding gendered interpretation as a central analytical concern, this study highlights the need to reconsider flirting as a site where linguistic practice, power, and gender ideology intersect.

By positioning flirting as a speech act shaped by gender performativity, this study offers a linguistically oriented framework that complements existing behavioral and psychological approaches to the study of flirtation. Rather than focusing solely on individual traits, intentions, or outcomes, this perspective foregrounds language as the primary medium through which flirtation is enacted and gendered identities are performed. In doing so, the study demonstrates how flirtatious meaning emerges through interactional practices that are socially regulated and discursively patterned.

Furthermore, this framework suggests that future research should place greater emphasis on discourse-level analysis in order to capture the dynamic processes through which flirtation is constructed, negotiated, and contested in real-life interaction. Such an approach would allow researchers to examine how ambiguity, power relations, and gender norms operate moment by moment within both offline and digital contexts. By extending analysis beyond outcomes and motivations to the linguistic organization of interaction itself, future studies can develop a more comprehensive understanding of flirtation as a situated, strategic, and socially embedded communicative practice.

Research shows that the meaning of "flirting" differs between women and men due to variations in communicative strategies, social expectations, and interpretive frameworks. A corpus-based analysis demonstrates that men and women employ distinct linguistic and pragmatic patterns when initiating and responding to flirtatious exchanges, indicating that

flirtation is discursively constructed in gendered ways (Scharrer & Weckermann, 2025). Similarly, instrumental flirting research reveals that gender shapes how charm and relational cues are perceived in interactional settings (Henningesen & Miller Henningesen, 2023). Furthermore, cross-cultural findings indicate that men and women evaluate the effectiveness of flirtation tactics differently, reflecting gendered norms in interpreting friendliness, playfulness, and sexual intent (Kennair et al., 2022)

Conclusion

This study concludes that flirting is not merely a spontaneous or instinctive behavior, but rather a socially constructed and linguistically mediated act whose meaning and function vary significantly between men and women. Flirting operates within specific social frameworks where gender norms, sexual scripts, and performative identities strongly influence how flirtatious language is produced, displayed, and interpreted. Men and women often draw on different cultural expectations when engaging in flirtation, which can lead to varying intentions and interpretations of the same linguistic cues. As a result, flirtatious interactions are inherently ambiguous and context-dependent, relying heavily on shared social knowledge and assumptions. By emphasizing the role of language and strategic ambiguity, this research highlights how flirting serves multiple communicative purposes beyond romantic or sexual interest, such as maintaining social bonds, negotiating power, or expressing identity. The findings demonstrate that flirtation is not only about what is said, but also how it is said, including tone, humor, indirectness, and non-verbal cues that accompany verbal expressions. Through this lens, flirting becomes a performative act where individuals actively construct and manage their social personas in interaction with others. In doing so, this study helps bridge the gap between theoretical perspectives on gender and language and real-life communicative practices observed in everyday interactions.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and illustrative observational examples rather than primary empirical evidence. This limitation restricts the depth of insight into participants' intentions and interpretations during flirtatious exchanges. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating interviews, discourse analysis, or ethnographic methods to capture firsthand experiences. Additionally, cross-cultural and multilingual data would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how flirting operates across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, potentially revealing both universal patterns and culture-specific variations in flirtatious communication.

Acknowledgment

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