

Do Men and Women Speak Differently? -An Investigation into the Linguistic Behaviour of Men and Women

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Abstract: Linguistic variation is an important area of study in Sociolinguistics. One of these linguistic variations is related to gender. One major question in Sociolinguistics is “Do women and men talk differently?” This question is further intensified by Gray’s book (1992) “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus”. If men and women are from two different planets, then it is imperative to analyze the relation between language and gender. This paper aims to investigate the relation between language and gender with a view to generate better understanding and avoid misinterpretation and communication failure in male female discourse. This would help minimize gender discrimination in society since the differences between men and women are socially defined and distorted through a lens of sexism in which men assume superiority over women and maintain it through domination. It will also try to explore whether this gender difference has any implication in language teaching and suggest ways to overcome the problem in language teaching.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, gender, men, women, language.

Introduction

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society (Fitzmaurice and Biber, 2002 mentioned in Thu 2010). It investigates numerous variables such as age, ethnicity, regional locations, social classes, and gender that may affect language use. Nowadays, language and gender relationship is a vibrant area of research and theory development within the larger study of language and society. Research shows that there are significant differences between men and women in the use of language, in the area of morphology, phonology and syntax but in this paper the particular focus is on the differences of use of language by men and women.

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There have been, in recent years, many empirical studies that have documented gender differences in language use. The speech of men and women differ in form, topic, content and use. According to Bernard (1972) men use instrumental talk. They are stereotyped as the conveyors of information and fact. Men's speech takes the forms like lecturing, argument, debate and declaration. On the other hand women's speech is stereotyped as nonassertive, tentative and supportive. Women's speech contains more emotion, euphemisms, apology, politeness forms, and incomplete sentences (Bernard, 1968). This difference of language use is associated with power, status, and socialization of the two genders. However, there are a lot of debates concerning this issue which may perplex anyone (Nina, 1987). Therefore, a careful investigation is needed to understand how men and women differ in their language use in social life.

Methodology

In this paper available research findings are discussed to examine the differences in language use by men and women in everyday life. An analysis of the explanation of such differences is also provided based on the theories used in gender research following functionalism and conflict theory approaches.

Gender

Before going to analyze the variation in language use by different genders, it is necessary to define and clarify the term 'gender'. The terminology used to define the difference between men and women is called sex or gender (Thu 2010). This idea is further clarified by Coates (1993). According to Coates (1993) 'sex' refers to biological distinction and 'gender' refers to socially constructed categories based on sex. Again according to Cameron (2006), the term sex is used in connection with the biological traits that indicate humans and other animals as either male or female, but gender refers to the cultural traits and behaviours considered appropriate for men and women by a particular society. Nowadays, gender is conceptualized as something that is 'done': it is never static rather it is produced actively and in interaction with others in people's everyday lives. As Deborah Cameron puts it, 'gender has turned out to be an extraordinarily intricate and multi-layered phenomenon – unstable, contested, intimately bound up with other social divisions' (Cameron, 1996. 34, mentioned in Coates, 2007).

This view of gender inevitably changes the aims of the language and gender researcher (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003, p. 13). By referring to Ochs' (1992) writing Holmes and Meyerhoff state that

men and women do not usually choose linguistic options to assert their masculine or feminine identities rather they adopt gendered linguistic strategies to perform pragmatic interactional functions of language and by doing this assume roles in a gendered way. So, it is clear that gender and sex do not have the same meaning. The characteristics of sex are attributed by nature and the characteristics of gender are attributed by society and culture. Human beings come in the world with sexual identity but acquire the gendered identity while growing up in the society.

Evidence of Difference in Language Use by Men and Women

In the past studies of sociolinguistics gender was not a significant variable. The change took place with the publication of Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975). According to Lakoff there is a wide range of gender differences in language use and these differences are directly related to the relative power of man and powerlessness of woman. Nina (1987) mentions that Lakoff's idea of women's speech is associated with the use of tag question because tag question conveys the uncertainty and unsure attitude of the speaker and thus it is considered as a mark of weakness. Besides, women's excessive politeness, specialized vocabulary such as mauve, pinking shear, tendency of making request rather than command and their overall expression as well as body language- all convey a sense of insecurity and the voice of an intimidated group. But according to Nina, (1987) people who took this powerless speech as a sign of women's powerlessness did not really judge the reason behind this style of utterance by women. Thus, these findings are equivocal and there is much debate on this issue. Nina (1987) mentions that men and women look for different things in their linguistic behavior, women emphasize their connection to each other while men are more interested in asserting their authority.

Relatively recent researchers like Wardhaugh (2010) and Thomas et al. (2003) point out men's nature of dominance by their talk. According to them, men tend to assert their own position of dominance, attract people and maintain audience by their language. Men concentrate more on the content of their talk and its outcome than on how it affects the feelings of others. Through their talk they try to maintain and increase their power and status.

Another difference prevails in language use by men and women which is the amount of talk. Some researchers like Ning et al. (2010) point out that women never stop talking and describe talk in a

degraded way as gossip, chatter, nag, rabbit, yak and natter. These expressions are seldom used to describe men's talk. But Weatherall (2002) holds just the opposite view. According to him it is men and not women who talk more. Women tend to talk more at home on the other hand in a social setting it is man who wants to hold the center stage telling jokes and stories. Many women become upset thinking that their husbands like to talk more to strangers than they do to them. However, this is difficult to guarantee that who talks more. It depends on situation, familiarity, social distance, mood, objective and time.

The idea that men and women differ in their language use is also found in Ahmad and Rethinam (2010). They found that asking question has different implications for men and women. For women, asking a question is a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships whereas for men it is a means to provide information. Women use question and some linguistic forms such as 'you know', 'as you see' with a view to encourage others to talk (Thomas et al., 2003).

Regarding the use of tag question, Holmes (2008) mentions that women put more emphasis than men on the polite or affective functions of tag question and use them as facilitative positive politeness devices. On the contrary, men use it for expressing uncertainty. Again, women use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more than men do. That is why, they interact in ways which help maintain and increase solidarity (Holmes, 1998).

Again, Holmes (2008) pointed that women use more standard speech forms whereas men use more vernacular forms because women are very status conscious. This linguistic behavior also shows women's insecurity and powerlessness since it is more evident with unemployed women. As they cannot use their occupation as a basis for signaling social status, they use a polished linguistic form for this purpose.

According to Holmes (2008), society also expects better behavior from women than from men because of the concept that the subordinate group must be polite. Particular linguistic behavior of some community also reflects social status and power difference. For example, in Bengali community a wife, being subordinate to her husband is not permitted to use the husband's name. She addresses him with a term such as *suncho* 'do you hear?' When she refers to him she uses a circumlocution (Holmes, 2008). Thus it is evident

that there is a clearly identifiable difference between women's and men's speech which account for gendered way of communication.

Other researchers like Maltz and Broker (1998) state that women performs three things with language –(1) creating and maintaining relationships of closeness and equality, (2) criticizing others in agreeable ways and (3) interpret accurately the speech of other women.

Regarding the content of talk Adler and Rodman (2006) mention that men and women discuss surprisingly different ranges of topics. The common topics for both genders are work, movie, television, physical appearance, dating, sex and sexuality. When there is conversation between two female friends, the topics are usually selected from domestic subjects like family, health, food, clothing, weight, reproductive matters, relationship problems, men and other women. On the other hand, conversation between men and men includes subjects like current events, business, sports, music, and other men and other women. Regarding gossip Adler and Rodman (2006) found that women are more likely to gossip about their close friends and family whereas men show preference for gossiping about sports figures and media personalities.

Adler and Rodman (2006) also argue that it is an exaggeration to say that man and woman communicate in a significantly different way. The goal of communication for both sexes is generally to make the conversation enjoyable by being friendly, showing interest about other person's conversation, and selecting topic that interest other person. But the way of accomplishing this goal is different for men and women. Men try to involve fun and jokes whereas women try to focus more frequently on feelings, relationships, personal problems and express empathy that can sooth others with a feeling that they are not alone. Communication researcher Julia Wood (mentioned in Adler and Rodman 2006) discovered that the feeling of man about their same sex conversation is something they *liked* and feeling of women about their same sex conversation is something they *needed*.

This idea is also reflected in Holme's (1995) speech as she says, most women enjoy talk and regard talking as an important means for developing personal relationship and keeping in touch, especially with friends and intimates. On the other hand "men tend to see language more as a tool for obtaining and conveying information. They see talk as a means to an end and the end can often be very precisely defined - a decision reached, for instance, some information gained, or a problem resolved" (Holmes, 1995, p.2).

Explanation of the Differences from Theoretical Perspective

Linguists have approached language and gender from a variety of perspectives. These can be labelled as the deficit approach, the dominance approach, the difference approach and the social constructionist approach (Coates, 2007). There is a historical sequence behind this development.

The deficit approach is based on Lakoff's *Language and Women's place* (1975) that proposed something called women's language (WL) which is characterized by linguistic features such as lexical hedges or fillers (e.g. well, you know, sort of), tag questions (she is very nice, isn't she?), rising intonation on declaratives, (it's really good?), empty adjectives (e.g. divine, charming), precise colour term, intensifies (just, so), hypercorrect grammar, super polite forms, avoidance of strong swear words and emphatic stress (Holmes, 2008). Weatherall (2003) mentioned that Lakoff clearly depicts women's language to convey weakness, uncertainty, unimportance and thus considers it as inferior to men's language, which according to her is direct, clear and succinct. Lakoff holds the view that women are socialized to use this type of language so that they may not offend men. Research found that Lakoff's deficit theory emphasized "the perceived negative aspects of women's speech in contrast to the perceived normative language of men" (Davis and Skilton-Sylvester, 2004).

Then comes the dominance approach which sees women as an oppressed group and interprets linguistic differences in women's and men's speech in terms of men's dominance and women's subordination (Coates, 2007). The researchers who follow this approach are concerned with showing how male dominance is enacted through linguistic practice. 'Doing power' is often a way of 'doing gender' too (West & Zimmerman 1983 mentioned in Coates, 2007). This idea is evident in men's interrupting and overlapping women's speech by using high volume of words.

The third approach, the difference approach, arises from women's growing resistance to being treated as a subordinate group (Coates, 2007). This approach is based on Tannen's (1991) best seller book *You Just Don't Understand* which upholds that women have a different voice, a different psychology, and a different experience of love, work and the family from men's. This reflects that the difference is in the culture of conversation rather than in the difference of power.

The latest approach is the social constructionist approach which sees gender identity as dynamic and as a social construct rather than static or 'given' social category. Now gender is seen as something that is *accomplished* in talk every time we speak.

Lakoff's (1975) study arose from an essentialist understanding of gender as a static binary that assumed a direct relationship between language and gender and created fixed notion about what men and women do in their conversation. But the recent identity theorists like Butler 1990; Cameron 2005; criticize the previous framework for ignoring the multiple and shifting identities "predicated on a number of factors, to race, class, ethnicity, geographic region, culture, economic and social status, occupation, sexuality and religious affiliation.

Functionalism and Conflict Theories

The deficit approach, dominance approach and even difference approach of gender actually follow functionalism and conflict theories of sociology. According to functionalist theory "society is viewed as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. In other words life is guided by social structure" (Macionis & Plummer, 2002, p. 22) Functionalist perspective of sociology highlights that every aspect of society is interdependent and thereby form society's stability and function as a whole. Unlike the other two theories symbolic interactionism and conflict theory, functionalists theory considers that society is held together by social consensus in which members of the society agree upon and work together to achieve what is best for society as a whole. Within this approach, "gender forms a complementary set of roles that links men and women together into family units that carry out various functions vital to the operation of society" (Macionis & Plummer, 2002, p.301). That is why men and women constitute the society and perform their specific function. It assigns women to perform their role at home and men at labour. But later functionalism is challenged by the conflict theory because it failed to address the negative, conflicted, ever-changing nature of society. It does not appreciate people taking an active role to change their social environment, even when such change may benefit them. Thus conflict theory complemented the functional perspective by highlighting not solidarity but division based on inequality and disparities in power.

Research shows that Lakoff's deficit theory suffers from serious weakness and her emphasis on the powerlessness of female speakers is out of tune with modern attitudes (Coates, 2007). Moreover, the differences of status that she highlighted were based on intuition and subjective experience rather than on empirical evidence (Holmes, 2008).

On the other hand the dominance and the difference approach too have some serious limitations. The effect of power cannot clearly explain why women use a different speech style from men in certain situations (Weatherall, 2003).

Findings

From the above discussion it can be said that the use of language by men and women differ in many ways. Those are as follows:

1. The difference of language use by men and women reflects the difference of power and social status.
2. In certain cases language used by women signals their insecurity and powerlessness.
3. Women are more likely to use linguistic device that express solidarity more than men do.
4. Women use language more for affective purposes than men.
5. Women use more standard language than men to appear polite in the society.

So, it is evident that men and women differ in their use of language. This difference arises from various perspectives such as power, status, gender, socialization and perception about the purpose of talk in their day-to-day life. But it would be somewhat exaggerated to say that they are from two different planets and there is a possibility of serious misunderstanding between them.

Implication of Gender Difference in Language Teaching

Language learning is no more seen as a matter of individual learners' cognition and motivation, rather it is seen as a social process involving interaction and participation in social communities (Johnson, mentioned in Wadell et al., 2011). Therefore, learners' identities as constructed by themselves as well as by others can greatly impact on successful language acquisition. Research found that several aspects of identity such as gender and ethnicity could

affect learning language (Gordon, 2004; Norton Peirce, 1995 mentioned in Wadell et al., 2011).

According to Menard-Warwick (2005) “Language learning can only be successful to the extent that it is congruent with the learners’ sense of their gender roles, societal positions, class backgrounds, and ethnic histories” (p. 262). If these factors are ignored, language learning will be limited. Thus the theme of gender and identity and its impact on SLA (Second Language Acquisition) should be taken into consideration with a view to facilitating the learners of diverse background.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that this paper highlights the difference of language use by men and women by investigating the recent research available in this field and analyzing the cause of the difference following the established theories in the field of gender research. The theories like the deficit and dominance approach depicts women as powerless and victim to the male dominated society. These theories also cast men as undermining, excluding and demeaning women. Both sides are pictured as extreme and unpleasant. The difference approach, on the other hand, tries to uphold women’s self respect and analyses the difference from cultural perspective and socialization. According to this approach every society holds a set value about the type of behavior expected from its male and female members. Both boys and girls unconsciously pick up the norms of the society and appear as socialized, polished and civilized human being perfect for their respective role. However, it should be mentioned that the concept of equal right for both sexes are not new. But how far this demand is achieved? Gender discrimination is still prevailing in society in various forms. Therefore, to bring about the desired change a reformation is needed in the socialization process. If a child is raised in a gender biased society, he/she will not be able to appreciate the demand of equality. So, a conscious effort should be given in reforming the social norms. One way of doing this is through education. Curriculum, syllabus, and teaching materials should highlight women’s progressive role and equality in the society. Consciously or unconsciously children will depict the changed role of women in their mind and gradually it will have its deep root in culture which will ultimately minimize inequality in society. Literacy and women empowerment can also directly contribute to this change.

However further research is needed to explore the idea fully as the concept of gender is always getting modified. Following Okamoto's (2002, p.102) I will say that "gender cannot be isolated as an independent variable for determining language use, other variables need to be considered as simultaneously relevant and the influence of gender with a range of other factors need to be carefully examined in each speech community.

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