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Gendered Language: A Study of Sociolinguistic Theories and Approaches

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Abstract

The variations in language use between men and women have been studied for a long time. Lexical choices made by the speakers or writers play on the cognition of the listener or reader and reduplicate gender related biases or preconceived notions even when the recipients of the message are gender neutral. This process is unconscious and automatic. Gender differences and biases based upon these have been and are an indivisible facet of the global cultural ethos. Patriarchal social design and traditional practices titled in disfavour of women continue to foster gender bias. Inequality between genders is multidimensional and for this very reason, a challenge for social scientists and policy makers. The aim of this paper is to look at the disparities in gendered language and to conclude if there is such a thing as gendered language. It also clarifies the meanings of few gender-linguistic words. The paper also seeks to clarify these variations on the grounds of these differences and changes. The study summarises a large number of leading theories on the question of gendered language and sociolinguistic factors that may be the cause of such variations in language use and why there may be a need to look at the issue of gendered language through a more magnifying glass.

Introduction

Looking at the studies on language and gender, some of the findings have overemphasized the importance of gender, while ignoring heterogeneity and other contextual variables. In order to provide an overarching and objective justification for how the interaction between men and women are modulated by their language use. Scholars have investigated the disparities between male and female language use by looking at the differences created by society (Alhourani, 2021, Alsaraireh, Singh & Hajimia, 2020, Alsaraireh & Dubey, 2020, Charernnit, 2020). There have also been extensive studies on social, educational, and psychological fallouts of these differences. Concomitant to this, the view developed that men and women have different cultures; "subculture" is the proper term for the cultural variations that contribute to their distinct characteristics. A transition in their ways of language use may be detected from early childhood to adulthood. Besides these, they are also part of their nation's cultural undercurrent. Regardless of gender, both groups have the same belief system, and attitudes. In general, facets of research on this subject need to address the following: First, gender disparities must be accounted for in all respects, particularly in people's personality and their ways of communicating. Two scholars should abandon gender bias.

The metaphorical association of women and men and women speaking different languages has been very common since the early 90s when the view developed that *Men are from Mars and enjoy action, while Women are from Venus and like to chat*. Women see language as a means of communicating with people, whereas men see it as a competitive or combative tool.

Given that gender constitutes part of a writer's multiple identities, investigating how the development of second language writing reflects, affects, or constructs gender identity would provide important insights in educational contexts (Kubota, 2003). It must be noted that the issues of gender in the research fields of second and foreign language education, second language acquisition, and language strategies, language skills have been considered in some recent review articles. Explanations on variations of the speech among the females and males are extensively limited to grammatical types. In 1970s female researchers began to look at how language code translated sexist values and bias, a viewpoint discussed later in this study. Since gender is embedded in everything in today's society, researchers now analyze spoken and written data with the aim of understanding how gender is constructed in everyday life and of

assessing the role of language in creation and maintenance of contemporary masculinities and femininities (Coates, 2015)..

As early as the last quarter of the earlier century, Labov (1972a, 1972b), for instance, described mostly the speech of men. However, other linguists, such as the ones cited below, started to become interested in observable differences in language production depending on the sex of the speakers. The issue of women interacting differently from men has been discussed for hundreds of years. However, feminist movements in the 1960s realized that language was one of the instruments of female oppression by males. As a matter of fact, language not only reflected a patriarchal system but also emphasized male supremacy over women. Most of the works analyzing language were to do mostly with male language production.

 Lakoff's (1975) work is the best example for this. Studies in the region of gender and language mostly use two paradigms or models- that of difference and dominance. Lakoff (1975) compiled women's language in her book released in 1975, highlighting the language used by the women in an article that followed soon after the book. These offer classic examples of typicality of women's language. For hedge, women use phrases (e.g., kind of, sort of); polite words (e.g., I'd appreciate it if., would you mind); tag questions (e.g., "You're going to dinner, aren't you?"); intonational words (e.g., quite, very, so); empty adjectives (lovely, adorable, divine); and modal constructions: (e.g., ought to, can, should). Generally, women would use question intonation in the declarative statements (e.g., "What school do you attend? Oxford school?"); own unique dictionary for colors whereas men have it for sports; use proper pronunciation and correct grammar but men paraphrase more often; "wh-" imperatives are more used (Why you didn't call me?") but men use them less frequently; apologizise more (e.g., "I'm sorry for") and also use more qualifiers (e.g., "I think that..."). Also, women have less humor and take more time to understand a joke; tend to use more intensifiers (e.g., "I am so for your success!") whereas men avoid using expletives, also indirect requests and commands are largely used by women (e.g., "isn't it cold in here?").

However, Dubois & Crouch (1975) initiated an analysis on Lakoff's (1975) suggestion, specifically on tag questions. They assessed the usage of the tag questions among professional meeting context and concluded that a minimum of tag questions in the context was mostly used by male than female. Their findings showed that Lakoff's (1975) theory favored the folk linguistics or highly stereotypical beliefs.

In a rich review of literature on gender differences and language, Philips (1980) sums up the findings of Lakoff (1975) as being central to much of the later work on the correlation between language and gender. One central finding is in terms of societal power structures based upon language. According to Lakoff (1975), women's speech displays less 'power; than men's speech'. This is evident in: 1. Women using vocabulary items that men usually do not; 2. Greater use of 'empty' adjectives by women; 3. Greater use of question tags by women than men; 4. Women's speech is invariably more polite with words such as, 'please' used more frequently; 5. More hedges are found in women's speech than in men's; 6. Greater use of intensifiers such as 'very' by women; 7. Women's speech displays grammatical hypercorrectness with marked absence of words such as 'ain't' and 'goin'.

Gender liberation protests in the '60s saw that language was an instrument of patriarchal domination. Although language actually perpetuated patriarchy, it also reinforced male dominance over women. Many of the language works focused on the development of men, exclusion of women. Labov's work (1972a, 1972b) mostly describes the voice of men while the other linguists began to concentrate on variations in speech quality based on the speaker's sex. According to Cameron and Coates (1985), the quantum of conversation one produces is a factor of the social environment that we find ourselves in. However, they aver that significant differences between the production of speech by men and women are not to be found. On the contrary, Brizendine (1994) states that women produce more speech than men, a reversal of an earlier finding by Drass (1986) who declared that men speak more than women.

Somewhat later, Tannen (1984) created a more organized list of Lakoff's (1975) features by identifying six parameters along which the language of men and women can be differentiated. These are: Status vs. support; Independence vs. intimacy; Advice vs. understanding; Information vs. feelings; Orders vs. proposals; Conflict vs. compromise. Holmes (2001) and O´Barr and Atkins (1998) have both constructed similar lists of Lakoff's (1975) work on "women's language".

The theory of Linguistic Determinism (Sapir, 1929), in fact, proposed the existence of different and unique worlds built upon the language habits of groups. These are unconsciously built realities that present themselves as the 'real world' to the language users. In a well-documented account of at least two, now extinct, languages of the native Americans, Sapir (1929) noted gender specific differences in word forms applied to the same set of objects by men and women

(www.encyclopedia.com). These were the languages of the Yana and the Yahi peoples. Elsewhere, amongst the Ubang farming community in South Nigeria, men and women use what appears to be two unique lexis when they speak. Many objects have two names, one used by the men, the other by the women. One example is of yam, which is called '*irui*' by the females and '*itong*' by the males. However, a pattern to define these differences is missing (www.bbc.co.uk). In Japanese too, there exists gendered language, though not with many differences. So far so good. What is important to note is that the whole idea behind the feminine speech in Japanese is to make it sound 'softer' and 'submissive'! The saving grace is that these differences exist only in the speech and not in writing. This points towards playing of pre conceived gender roles. The main difference lies in the sentence enders, question forms, and in the use of 'I' and 'you' (www.tofugu.com). Thus, the gendered language as far as Japanese is concerned, is limited to the roles rather than grammatical structures or lexis.

However, in languages that do have distinct male and female varieties, both the varieties are open for use by males, sometimes, because they tend to pick the female variety while under the care of women in their younger years. But as they attain puberty or adulthood, they are expected to switch to the male variety. Most of the times they have no alternatives as stated in Language, Gender and Sexuality.

Many of the theories of gendered language were rooted in the premise of inferior power position being reflected in women's language. These came to be placed under the broad subheading of Dominance Approach. This approach holds that as compared to men, in conversations, women's speech is more interspersed with back channelling signals and fewer opposition to interruption, while men's speech behaviours show a tendency towards holding the power centre, more interruptions and challenges. This view reflects the findings of Zimmerman and West (1975) that speech situations reflect **societal power relationships**. In an interesting study of courtroom discourses, analysis demonstrated that the features of speech previously associated with women were used by people in position of powerlessness (O'Barr and Atkins, 1980, as quoted in Language, Gender and Sexuality). Consequently, the view that **language encodes power and power is created through** language. Recent studies, however, have also shown that such findings cannot be generalised across board. In other words, in all situations, all men cannot be assumed to be in a position of dominance over women. Therefore, dominance cannot be an all-encompassing explanation of differences in gendered language production (Talbot, 1996). Gender identities alone may not govern language in a large number of language situations. Sometimes, other/ multiple identities affect language production. One

example could be seen in language production amongst bi or multi-racial speech situation. In this, the need to establish one's racial identity rather than gender identity may be the dominant motivation. Whatever be the motivation behind a particular type of language production, it has been clear to linguists, anthropologists, sociologists and language specialists that language remains an important issue to be studied to understand the society more comprehensively.

Somewhat less critical than the Dominance Approach, was the Cultural Difference Approach. This was a product of the women's lib movements of the 70s. Notable amongst the studies undertaken driven by this approach were Maltz and Borker (1982). This new approach propounded that differences were discernible in the talk of men and women because they actually belonged to two different **Linguistic Sub-Cultures**. In other words, their early socialization was responsible for these speech differences. The theory of Dominance was based on the premise of male domination of women using the vehicle of language. The new approach however, had 'feminist' works focusing on interruption Zimmerman and West, 1975); use of verbose language, questions and question tags, and backchannelling (Fishman, 1983, as quoted in Harrington, Litosseliti, Sauntson, & Sunderland, 2008). Certain ways of speaking came to be recognised by feminists as characteristic of women's speech. Keeping conversations free of interruption (or if interrupting, limiting it to the purpose of encouraging and empathising with the speaker), and not vying for opportunity to speak, were seen as being exclusive to women's talk (Penelope, 1990). Many more recent works, particularly towards the late 90s, were undertaken to study gendered talk. Some of these investigated and evaluated exclusively women's talk while some were focused only on men's talk patterns. Xia (2013) holds that gender problems associated with language issues have evolved over the past thirty years. And of an interdisciplinary kind the study of gender has only existed for thousands of years The role of gender studies has shifted in the academia and public sphere, with feminism having the most impact in the latter half of the 1960s on the generations preceding this one. Feminist theories are used in almost every scholarly discipline today. So much so that some results have been shown to be overstated based on gender and heterogeneity. Many linguists are concerned with gender divisions within their own language.

Whichever the approach, the common thread was in their treatment of both men and women as belonging to separate social groups. One less philosophical but highly popular work on these lines was *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. This and the others till the present times, have kept the pointer on investigating and analysing the **differences in language use between**

men and women and **not inequality** between the genders. However, prior to this, inequality against women in mixed talk situations manoeuvred by men using language to the disadvantage of women or, when pursued by feminist-oriented researches, the superiority of all-women talk were the centres of academic interest.

The theory of Sapir (1929), in brief, propounds that our language is a construct of our thoughts. The other part of the theory is Linguistic Relativism: Distinctions encoded in one language are unique to that language alone. Further, there is no limit to the structural diversity of languages. The hypothesis of the current study, that there are considerable differences in the semantic and syntactic characteristics of language use by males and females, it would be a reasonable contention that this variance is symptomatic of the variance in their world view. Language is, after all, a tool or vehicle of thought and vocabulary is the basic foundation of idea conceptualisation offering a map of the concepts, processes and relationships that one wants to convey (Halliday's Functional Theory, 1978). In a larger sense, Fowler (1991) stated that vocabulary represents the world for a particular community and in doing so, categorisation or segmentation is needed to help members of a culture make sense of the world. When undertaking analysis of a discourse, it is important to find out which terms habitually occur and which segmented part of the world enjoys discursive attention.

Recommendations

The question of gendered language is one that deserves investigation in varied environments, not only the mother tongue, but also, in the L2 or foreign language milieu to gain a better understanding of the sociolinguistic processes at play. The following approaches to gender and language are possible as summarised by Sunderland (2013). The categories cited here are hers

1. Conversation Analysis: Analyses real life discourses or naturalistic interaction. It studies four main areas viz., turn taking, repair, action formation, and action sequencing.

2. Critical Discourse Analysis: Analyses linguistic cues, but, is marginally active in gender and language research. It sees language as essentially a social practice. It questions text positioning, beneficiary of the positioning, outcomes of this positioning, and the relationship of discourse and power distribution, in addition to other such possibilities (Janks, 2).

3. Ethnography: Analyses influence of social grouping on language. This approach establishes the relationship between natural language and socio-cultural-political milieu (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff and Holmes, 2014).

4. Discursive Psychology: Analyses real life discourse much like (1) but focuses on the respondents' mental state as affecting language production. What is crucial in this approach is the treatment of talk as an action tool (Molder, 2015).

5. Feminist Theory, Queer Theory: Analyses special features of language produced by women or the queer community as being distinct from that of men or the not-queer groups. This is an identity-based approach and takes into account the feminist, queer, and sociolinguistic theories to study language (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004).

6. Feminist Post Structural Discourse Analysis: Combines feminism and discourse analyses in the study of gendered language production. It holds that there are many, and not one, discourses at play at the same time. Accordingly, subjects constantly shift between positions of power and powerlessness in discourse situations. This approach is mainly based on the theories proposed by Weedon (1997) and consequently developed by Baxter (2002).

7. Pragmatics: While Language Analysis and Pragmatics may appear to have little or nothing in common, both and especially, both taken together reflect upon the socio-cultural and environmental background of speakers and have brought into focus factors such as, egocentrism and salience which play a significant role in the communicative process (Horn and Kecskes, 2013).

8. Psychoanalysis: reflects and develops current understandings of gender, identity and discourse, particularly the shift from 'gender differences' to the discoursal shaping of gender.

9. Variationist Sociolinguistics: This was an approach proposed by Labov and focuses on the working of language between people. His methods have been useful in the field of social dialectology.

Conclusion

Though it may be utopian to think of eradicating linguistic bias, yet this study hopes to contribute meaningfully to curb it and substitute the temptation of allowing it to seep into communication, by educating and training users to substitute these with gender-free language and helping ensure greater gender equality. Reviewing studies on language and gender in the broader field of second and foreign language education, Sunderland (2013) synthesizes a large

number of publications with a wide range of topics, including language learning ability, motivation/investment, teacher perceptions, learning styles and strategies, classroom interaction, teaching materials, testing, learner identities, masculinities, and pedagogies. Taking a close look at the importance of gender and writing relation, it is helpful to state that the second language writing research may explore gender differences in how men and women or boys and girls write differently in L2 with respect to process and product (Kubota, 2003). These differences, however, should not be conceptualized as fixed traits, but as phenomena contingent on context and power.

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