



On Gender Difference in English Language and Its Causes

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Abstract

Interaction between language and gender has always been one of the over-heated subjects in sociolinguistics. Based on findings from related areas, this thesis aims to give a comprehensive account of gender difference in English language and the possible causes, in order to offer an indication for the establishment of harmonious interpersonal relationships as well as different focus when teaching students of different genders to improve learning and teaching efficiency at the same time.

Keywords: Gender difference, English language, Causes

1. Introduction

Gender difference has entered into English language studies as a linguistic variable for a long time. As one of the popular fields in sociolinguistics, explorations on gender difference in English language and other languages as well have experienced a period of gradual development. The relation between language and gender has become one of the major issues in sociolinguistics since early 1970s. Then an explosion of related research in full wings has been carried out in many separate aspects. There is no doubt that researches and studies in this field will do good for men and women to understand each other, providing basis for establishing harmonious interpersonal relationship. Apart from that these researches will facilitate both English learning and teaching as well as cross-cultural communication.

However, it has to be acknowledged that the concept of "gender" has not been well defined and is not well understood. Coming to it in another way gender issues are still misunderstood by people in general. The definition of gender given by FAO (1997) is "the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material. Gender is not determined biologically, as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men, but is constructed socially. It is a central organizing principle of societies, and often governs the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution". (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5608e/y5608e01.htm>)

In spite of this definition, gender still is often misunderstood. In order to correctly understand gender, it is useful to distinguish the meaning of the word "sex" and that of the word "gender" when studying the lexicon, for the distinction between these two words are often blurred. First, "sex" generally refers to biology and anatomy. People are said to be of the male sex or the female sex. It is determined by three sets of characteristics: external sex organs, internal sex organs, and secondary sexual development at puberty. Second, the word "sex" is also used to mean sexual intercourse or activity.

By contrast, "gender" refers to a set of qualities and behaviors expected from a female or male by society. What's more, gender roles are learned and can be affected by factors such as education or economics. They vary widely within the same culture and they also differ from each other among cultures. To be brief, while an individual's sex does not change, his or her gender roles are socially determined and can change over time. (www.engenderhealth.org/wh/sg/egwhat.html)

So we can see that gender is the difference between women and men resulted from cultural and social expectation. No matter a man and a woman are from the same society or they are of different cultural background, the differences they display in general are reflected through their respective constraints, views, opportunities, needs, roles and responsibilities.

Thus the thesis adopts the sociolinguistic theories and methods in order to give an account of the differences in English language, conveyed through conversation in particular, as well as their possible causes.

2. Gender Difference Reflected in English Language

In our modern society, it would therefore appear that women are equal with men. However the harsh reality tells us that women are not provided with an equal opportunity even for discussion, due to the fact that the two sexes respectively command different communication styles. In other words, the language women use is different from the one that men use. In the following part, differences in how they use their language and how they behave in conversational interaction will be presented in details.

2.1 Gender Difference in Vocabulary

Take a look at the following aggressive and sarcastic expressions picked out from men's daily speeches (Vancouver, P.R. 1998).

1. Facts be damned
2. Go back to the cranial explorations of the upper reaches of your *****, it suits you.
3. Get a life!!!
4. I have no intention of 'lightening up' when you continue to make trashy postings.
5. Did you just pull that out of your ****?

From the above examples we can see the point that male speakers often use tabooed words and slang in their daily speeches. To be exact, tabooed words and slang can be found more frequently in men's language than in women's, though they are of the same educational level. Besides, other studies also show that males tend to command a more vernacular style than females---in other words, there are also more vernacular words in males' speech than in females'.

2.2 Difference in Topic-Selection

Men and women are also found different in topic selection, for example, politics and economics are major topics chosen by male speakers, while education and family are the ones for female speakers. Just as Lydie Meunier(1996) states in his article, "The topics such as sports, politics and cars which are seen as 'serious' are preserved for men only, the choice for women are the topics such as child-bearing and personal relationships which are labeled as 'trivial'".

(<http://hhobel.phl.univie.ac.at/mii/gpmc.dir9606/msg00013.html>)

2.3 Difference in Attitudes in Face of Unlucky Events or Complaints

When in face of unlucky events or complaints, conveyed through conversation, men and women also display difference, for men always try to offer solutions while women often offer sympathy.

The following is an example given by Tannen (1991):

Eve had a benign lump removed from her breast. When she confided to her husband, Mark, that she was distressed because the stitches changed the contour of her breast, he answered, "You can always have plastic surgery."

This comment bothered her. "I'm sorry you don't like the way it looks," she protested. "But I'm not having any more surgery!"

Mark was hurt and puzzled. "I don't care about a scar," he replied. "It doesn't bother me at all."

"Then why are you telling me to have plastic surgery?" she asked.

"Because you were upset about the way it looks."

Eve felt like a heel. Mark had been wonderfully supportive throughout her surgery. How could she snap at him now?

The problem is resulted from the different approaches of men and women when they face complaints or unlucky events. To many men a complaint means a challenge for him to come up with a solution. Then it is natural that Mark in the context thinks he is reassuring Eve by telling her there was something she could do about her scar. But often, women who complain are looking for emotional support, instead of solutions.

The situation is also true in daily life. When my mother tells my father she doesn't feel well, he inhesitantly offers to take her to the doctor. As a matter of fact, my mother is disappointed with his reaction. Like many men, my father is focused on what he can do, while my mother wants sympathy.

2.4 Difference in Giving Orders

With regard to giving orders, linguists also analyzed the differences between how males and females, mainly bosses, giving orders to their staff in their workplace. In order not to appear bossy to their subordinates, the phrases women bosses usually use are 'I would', 'Is there any way we could', 'Maybe we should'. Women's style of talking makes them seem less capable and less confident, for they want to be seen as being easy of approach. This indicates the truth that though women are of higher status, they still stick to their particular style that is less powerful and indirect. On the contrary, men bosses use fewer words when giving orders and tend to be more direct.

2.5 Difference in Request Patterns

Let us come to the difference in this part through the examples cited below.

Example 1 A married couple was on their way home. The wife turned to her husband and asked, "Would you like to stop for a coffee?"

"No, thanks," he answered truthfully. So they didn't stop.

Then what about the result? The wife, who had indeed wanted to stop, became annoyed because she felt her preference had not been considered. The husband, seeing his wife was angry, became frustrated. Why didn't she just say what she wanted?

Example 2 Diana often begins statements with "Let's." She might say "Let's park over there" or "Let's clean up now, before lunch."

This makes Nathan angry. He has interpreted Diana's "Let's" as a command. Like most men, he resists being told what to do. (Tannen, 1991)

From the first example, we can see that the wife expressed her request or her real intention in a way of negotiation. To her disappointment, her husband directly said no, failing in finding out her real intention. By contrast, the husband believed that she should have expressed her intention in a direct way, which characterized the features of men's style of request. In the second example, it should be pointed out that Diana is making request rather than demands. Though women usually express their request in the form of proposals, these proposals are in need of winning agreement before being carried out. As a result, the request pattern of women can be described by the word "indirect".

2.6 Difference in Amount of Talk

The amount of talk is another field where men and women display the difference in their language. Usually men talk much more than women in public communications. In contrast to that women talk much more in their family than men do. Here comes an interesting example:

When a husband opens a newspaper, he asks his wife "Is there anything you'd like to say to me before I start reading the paper?" We know there isn't. But as soon as the man begins reading, his wife will think of something to say to him.

Then the other example:

All Emily's life she has been used to talking her feelings with friends and relatives. But Owen has the habit of keeping his innermost thoughts to himself. As a result, after their marriage, Emily told her friends that his such habit is a source of her dissatisfaction with her husband, Owen. Because each time when she tells him what she is thinking, he listens silently, and when she asks him about his thought, he always says, "Nothing."

The first example is interesting to some extent because people recognize their own experience from it. Therefore what is not interesting in the first example is that many women are heartbroken when their husbands do not talk to them at home. However, many men are confused when they disappoint their wives without knowing why. The reason for the conflict in the second example is that to most men talk means information, so they do not feel that talk is necessary at home. Accordingly, with regard to the amount of talk, when a couple is at home, the wife tends to talk much more than the husband. Yet when in a social setting, many such men will hold the center stage, telling jokes and stories. They will try to use conversation to claim attention. Thus women are inevitably hurt due to the fact that their husbands talk more to strangers than to them.

2.7 Difference in Intonation

In terms of intonation, men and women also display some difference. It is more frequent that female speakers tend to command a wider range of intonation, making their speech sound somewhat affected. It is also discovered that females tend to use the low-rise intonation with statements more frequently than male speakers. Some daily used sentences are brought here:

You are going to have dinner. (rising)

It is that I am going to leave. (rising down)

Peter will go to Paris for his further study. (down rising)

3. Analysis of the Causes of the Difference

3.1 Early Childhood Socialization

Tannen (1991) once said that, even as children, people's conversational styles differ. She also argued that the basis for the difference between men's and women's conversational styles stem from how boys and girls talk and play in their childhood. "Girls often choose to sit and talk in small groups, whereas boys play in larger groups that are activity-focused," she said.

In her best-seller *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen writes from the perspective that boys have been socialized differently from girls, and that their discourse reflects such societal influences and expectations. For example, girls are taught to talk in small groups and play toys. They always pay attention to behave themselves in a polite and ladylike way. On the contrary, boys are taught to play in large groups, trying their best to win the dominance through their efforts. Then after they become adults, they bring their respective childhood socialization with them, which is reflected through their communication style.

3.2 Cultural and Social Expectation

Linguists in related areas have pointed out that much of gendered behavior is a kind of learned behavior as a result of the expectation from culture and society. After one's birth in a certain realm, language, culture and society integrate together to give the new member a specific level of recognition or expectation. Charlotte Krolokke's (2003) statement best testifies this point. According to her opinion, when speakers are under a conversational context, there is an expectation for women and girls to show that they are of the same opinion with other speakers. But as for men and boys, talk is a kind of means to gain status or dominance in order to show that they are unique. The following is the specific expectation from culture and society.

3.2.1 Cultural Expectation

Language is the carrier of culture, which at the same time, restricts the language.

Women's speech just reflects the cultural expectations which call for niceness, politeness and ladylike expression, which is educated diction, avoiding bad words. At the same time, sexual terms are more acceptable to be used by men, who will be regarded as "one of the guys". A culture usually divides behaviors into masculine and feminine. In our culture we are likely to regard the men who show the behaviors, styles, or interests that are usually attached to women as "womenish" and to call the boys who behave in this way "sissies." Women who have interests that usually belong to men are referred to as "manish" and the girls who behave in this way are often called "tomboys." As a result, even a little boy, knows the way in which he should behave himself, for he is afraid of being referred to as "sissy". In one word, no matter a man or a woman has to pay attention to his or her speech and behavior because there is a division given out by their culture, which is deep-rooted in their mind.

3.2.2 Social Expectation

It has been stated in chapter 2.3 that men and women are different from each other in topic selection in conversation. It is the Social values that confine female speakers to certain topics such as child-bearing, personal relationships. Simone de Beauvoir (1950) and the following feminist critics have discovered the fact that women are inferior to men in society. Men hold absolute dominance, while women are put into secondary status. This reason can best explain why women are indirect in proposing their request even orders.

3.3 Different Role of Language as for Men and Women

3.3.1 Definition of Gender Role

With regard to gender roles, they are referred to as the 'social definition' of women and men. The gender roles for men and women vary among different societies and cultures.

Gender-specific roles and responsibilities are often conditioned by family structure, specific impacts of the economy, and other relevant factors.

To be brief, gender role refers to the behaviors and desires to act in certain ways that are viewed as masculine or feminine by a particular culture. It has to be clear that language plays a key role in the construction and socialization of gender roles. Following comes the specific role of language for men and women.

3.3.2 The Role of Language for Men and Women

For most women, language is mainly helpful to establish harmonious interpersonal relationship. For most men it is a

means to preserve authority and maintain status in a competitive society. What's more, according to past sociolinguistic studies, harmony-seeking can be considered as of inferior social status among men. Therefore, the reason for their different communication styles is that in fact the purposes they use language in conversation are not the same.

3.4 Physiological and Psychological Factors

3.4.1 Physiological Factors

There is a famous saying that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Certainly we can not therefore attribute the difference between women and men to this saying. Thanks to modern science which has provided some credible evidence.

It has been widely known that language ability is controlled by the left part of the brain. However, researchers from Georgetown University headed by Michael Ullman recently claim that boys and girls tend to use different parts of their brain to learn some fundamental parts of grammar and certain diction learning. This study may explain the difference between men and women in diction the correctness of grammar.

3.4.2 Psychological Factors

In most English speaking communities, it has been discovered that women are more status-conscious than men. Accordingly, women tend to use more standard or educated expressions in their speeches. Besides it has been suggested that men tend to think logically, while women are likely to think emotionally. This point may best testify that when in face of unlucky events or complains, men will try to come up with a solution while women try to show their sympathy.

4. Conclusion

Gender difference, as a social phenomenon, has been reflected in language and been studied in many separate areas for a long time. In the past decades, sociolinguistic research dealing with relationship between gender difference and language has undergone significant change and gain full development. This thesis surveys the results from the current and previous researches and studies as well to bring into display the difference between male language and female language, reflected in vocabulary, syntax and so forth. Also it attempts to penetrate into the causes of these differences. What should be pointed out is that language can be reflected through many aspects. But language in this thesis is, for most part, reflected through conversations of all forms. In other words, sentences and expressions selected into this article are mainly from all sorts of talks of all-female, all-male, and mixed-sex groups. Therefore, limitation is inevitable.

Near the end, it should be pointed out that the way is still endless for researchers to disclose more and more detailed difference between male and female speakers as well as their specific causes, which is of great values in the field of English teaching and learning as well as cross-cultural exchanges.

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