

Gender Differences in English Conversation from Perspective of
Sociolinguistics

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Abstract

Humanity consists of male and female. As the saying goes “There is a difference between men and women”; This expression addresses not only the difference in psychology and physiology, but also language use. Language is the mirror of society, but there is an inter dependence between language and society. Gender differences in language are a common phenomenon that reflect language users’ position considering social, aspects of culture and custom. It is easy to misunderstand a speaker’s intention in daily conversations if the receiver does not comprehend the relative knowledge of the producer. Gender aspects of communication can be misinterpreted. Therefore, it is important to learn gender differences in communication. The following article discusses gender differences in terms of vocabulary, syntax, the choice of topic from a sociolinguistics perspective. Also, the paper analyzes the causes of these differences in terms of mentality, social class and role, and subcultures as to facilitate students’ grasp of gender differences in English. The goal is to improve students’ understanding of gendered language and their ability to communicate.

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Chapter I Introduction

Language plays a very important role in our daily life; it shapes many aspects of human life. We use language not only to identify things, to think, or to record information, but also to represent all the things around us. In addition, language is a social behavior; we use it as a medium to get along in a community. It is upon these facts that the field of sociolinguistics is predicated.

Sociolinguistics, the study of language in relation to society, is very important in the field of TESOL, and, therefore, for second language teachers, it is important to know language as a system of phonemes, morphemes and syntaxes. But the teacher should also know social rules, cultural values and the variety in communicative conventions.

The study of gender differences in language use has been an important subject of the development of the field of sociolinguistics since the 1960s. Research into language and gender did not really begin in a systematic or serious way until the early 1970s. Lakoff (1973) assumes that certain language differences are caused by gender differences and are the reflection of the real social inequality of men and women. Thorne and Henley (1975) have affirmed that the male dominance theory has great influence on gender differences in language from the sociolinguistic perspective. Overall, men hold higher positions in society, so their relative power can be reflected in their speech. Vice versa, gender differences in language strengthen men's position in society.

Another reason, which can be regarded as the source of gender differences in language is the different understanding of each gender's value to the society: Women and men have a different understanding of value. One could say, that the value of men consists more in what they do, while women's value depends more on how they appear. Thus we can draw the conclusion that the perception of value of the speaker determines the style of his or her speech. In general, the speech of men is more direct and "tough", which can show their masculinity. On the contrary, women's speech is expected to be "more elegant" and implicit.

The knowledge of gender differences in language is necessary for language learners, and gender differences may exist not only in one but all languages. As a language learner, we should know the significance of the study of genders in language use, because in the future after graduation most of us will become a teacher of a foreign language. As specialists in language teaching, on the one hand, we need to be conscious of gender differences in language so that we can teach our students in an appropriate way. On the other hand, we need to know as much as possible about the speech patterns of men and women who are native speakers of English. Thirdly, a teacher needs to be able to recognize discrimination.

This paper mainly discusses the different styles of speech between men and women in daily conversation, including the purpose of conversations, the choice of the topics during the conversation, and the mode of conversation.

All in all, gender differences are reflected in many aspects in our daily life; we have to pay attention to them, so that we can avoid misunderstandings between men and women.

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is, “What are the differences between men and women in English conversation from perspective of sociolinguistics and why do they exist?”

Definition of Terms

Sociolinguistics. The study of the relation between language and society, including cultural norms, expectations, and context, on the way language is used, and the effects of language use on society. (William Labov, 1972).

Contrast Analysis. It is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities as a method of explaining why some features of a target language are more difficult to acquire than others. (Robert Rosenthal, 1985).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to research the gender differences in English daily conversation as to help students communicate with others in an appropriate way and achieve a high proficiency of the second language---English. Teachers can apply the

knowledge of gender differences in conversation English to teaching to avoid misunderstandings between men and women so that teaching English can be facilitated and students' learning can be improved.

Significance of the Study

There are many differences in the speech of men and women, so it is important to know what the differences are. As language teachers, we need to be conscious of gender differences in English so that we can teach our students in an appropriate way, which is necessary in the field of TESOL. Having a proper understanding of the role gender differences play in English conversation is significant to improve the quality of teaching ESL languages.

Delimitations of the Research

The scope of this paper does not allow for the inclusion of all aspects to this question. The limitations are as follows:

Firstly, research design is limited in accuracy because of the author's limited knowledge of psychology and of educational research experience.

Secondly, it should be pointed out that language can be reflected through many aspects. But language in this thesis is, for the most part, represented by conversations of all forms. In other words, sentences and expressions selected into this article are mainly from great variety of speech situation of all-female, all-male, and

mixed-gender groups. Therefore, limitation is inevitable. What is studied in this paper is far from being complete and further research is needed.

Methodology

A brief review of literature on the studies of gender differences in English, at home and abroad, will be conducted. A second review of literature relating the reasons affecting the gender differences will be carried out. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

Chapter II Review of Related Literature

This chapter reviews the literature on the manifestation of gender differences in English; it also reviews the causes of these differences.

The Manifestation of Gender Differences in English

The speech of women differs from the speech of men in daily conversation. Men and women differ in the kinds of language they use because men and women often fill distinctly different roles in society. We can analyze the differences of the speech of men and women from many aspects, such as the choice of vocabulary, syntax, pragmatics, and the topics of speech. Many of the differences may result from different socialization practices.

Lexical Choice

In general, women are more aware of beauty. For example, their ability to identify colors is stronger than that of men. Lakoff (1975) indicates that women acquire a great color vocabulary and use color lexicon more specific. Some words for colors like mauve, beige, ecru, aquamarine, lavender, are less frequently used by men. Heatherington (1980) supports the above view; she deems the reason causing that difference is the different choice of men and women lies in the quantitative. Women have the advantage of color-cognition. In comparison with men, they own a color lexicon with more quantity, higher quality and richer content.

However, because of the effect of culture and psychology, men are not as sensitive to the color terms, they often use some restricted color terms. In daily life,

women say *beige*, but not *light brown*, and men do not say *chartreuse*, rather, they are more likely to say *greenish*. *Mauve* is currently a favorite color of women in cosmetics and clothing, but a man would call this color *pale purple*.

Women prefer to use interjections to express feelings and emotion. According to Bloomfield (1933), the interjections such as *oh dear*, *dear me*, *gracious*, *goodness* almost exclusively exists in female language. These interjections are considered meaningless by men. Lakoff (1973) uses these two sentences to show the different gender specific types of interjections to prove the points:

Female: Oh, dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

Male: Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.

High frequency use of amplifiers is another distinguishing feature in women's conversation. According to Jespersen (1922), women like to use expression as the following: *He is so charming! It is so lovely! Thank you so much!* Key (1972) agrees with Jespersen's view, and notes that women are more likely to use strong expression such as *so*, *much*, *quite*, *vastly*. Lakoff (1975) names some adjectives often seen in women language like *divine*, *cute* as empty adjectives, which is further confirmed by Crosby's (1977). Verifying Lakoff's points, Bolinger's (1980) research also indicates that women have more opportunity to speak the following overlap adverbs: *very very*, *so so*, *much much*. Again, some compliment adjectives with exaggeration like *gorgeous*, *superb*, *adorable* are common in women.

The difference of lexical choice is also reflected in the usage of taboo words and euphemism. Jespersen (1922) points out that the sentence "He told an infernal lie"

said by a man may change into “He told a most dreadful fib” if said by a woman. Besides, Jespersen also thinks that the euphemistic use of *the other place, a very hot/uncomfortable place* instead of *hell* was coined by women. Spender (1980) claims that women tend to use euphemisms while men use more direct wordings. For example, women say “I have to go powder my nose” instead of “I need to use toilet”.

Men extensive use taboo concepts, women use these taboo concepts more restrictedly and indirectly. Women try to avoid expletives, such as *shit, hell, damn* and similar strong words for actions, concerning, bodily functions, instead women use *shoot and heck*, and, as stated above, women tend to use euphemisms to substitute some meaning they feel inconvenient to express. For example, “I have to go powder my nose” instead “I need to use toilet”. To do otherwise, the women would be judged as being unrefined.

Syntax

Lakoff (1975) has suggested that men and women differ in their styles of speech in ways that both are a result of gender stereotypes, and that in return the gender language feature reinforce those same stereotypes. Specifically, gender differences in speech styles are said to contribute to maintaining images of men as assertive, self-confident, and definite, and images of women as vague and lacking in confidence. Women's speech is also said to be more polite, in the sense of being more formal and more deferential than men's. The differences in speech style Lakoff discusses include the following linguistic dimensions:

Lakoff (1973) once said that women’s discourse is much more polite than that of

men. She thought that both composite request questions and tag questions are considered female sentence patterns. In addition, she also explains the reasons why women are so adept in tag questions: A tag question's function is somewhere between a declarative sentence and a question and its mode is weaker than the former but stronger than the latter. Lakoff asserts that their structure matches the psychological feature of women. Bolinger (1980) also points out that women have more opportunities to use tags than men. For example, when expressing personal opinions, men will say "This is better." But women may say "This is better, isn't it?" This tag reflects communicates hesitation and uncertainty.

Tags reflect the characteristic of female English, which is polite, euphemistic and connotational. Due to the existence of these mental factors and language features, women prefer to add some mood modifiers with vague meaning to express their opinions or ideas. Berger (1982) calls these similar language forms euphemism modifiers. The sentence patterns below are common in women's daily conversation: *I'm no expert but...; I may be wrong, but...; don't you think so? ; I kinda like that house.*

When using imperative sentences, women like to advice or beg others by using modal verbs such as *may, might, could, would* rather than simple request (Crosby, 1977). They may say "Would you mind shutting the door please?" or "I wonder if you could shut the door please?", while men use more straightforward commands and say "Shut the door!" This sentence spoken by a woman would be read as impolite.

Gender differences in speech syntax were found in a similar study by Crosby and Nyquist (1977). It coded use of empty adjectives, tag questions, hedges or

qualifiers, and so on. McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, and Gale (1977) also reports differences between the speech of male and female college students, with women using more tags, more imperatives in question form, more intensifiers such as *so* and *such*, and more modal verbs such as *might* have said. Chinese linguist Yang Yonglin (2004) also finds that men prefer to indicate views directly, thus they usually choose declarative sentence and imperative sentence to express order or command. On the contrary, women tend to use exclamatory sentence, imperative sentence with consult tone and interrogative sentence, especially tags.

Pragmatics

In daily communication, the differences of the speech of men and women can be reflected in pragmatics.

The gender difference in conversation can be seen in turn taking, interrupting, hesitating and so on. Men frequently interrupt women in cross-gender conversations, while women rarely interrupt men. In general, men use interruption, as a means of dominating and controlling interactions (West, 1979).

The following example provided by West illustrates that men often interrupt what women talk:

Male: Where the hell have you been?

Female: Well, I had to find Foster n' then

Male: Do you realize what time is it:

Female: Uh, yeah, but I couldn't find Fos

Male: I 've been standing around in that cruddy reserve bookroom for the last half hour!

Female: Sshush! The whole hall is gonna hear you

Male: I don't care! Next time you wanna "just stop off on campus" you can use your legs.

There are signs that men try to obtain the right of turn taking and switch to a new topic by denying their partner's a formative part in the conversation. They show a strong tendency of exclusiveness, which leads to conflict in a talk (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). On the other hand, hesitancy is more often appeared in women's conversations (Lakoff 1975).

Another research made by Hirshman (1973) shows that women use more hedges than men in cross-sex conversations. She also finds that there exists gender difference in utterance modifiers. Men prefer to use the forms like *most people, many females* to modify their mood, while women use *I think, I'd say, I guess*.

Topic-Selection

Tannen (1990) suggests that gender differences in language do reflect different cultures of conversation. Language communication is divided into rapport style and report style. She claims that women are more likely to use language to build and maintain relationships (a rapport style), while men are more likely to use language to communicate factual information (a report style) (Tannen, 1990). That is why the topics of women's conversation are different from that of men's. Just as Lydie Meunier (1996) states in her 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’”.

Moreover, the research suggests that women dislike to control the topic in the conversation. They often play the passive role, being obedient of following male speakers talk about.

The Causes of the Differences

As a social phenomenon, language always reflects social context. The gender differences in language are caused by the fundamental factors of social expectation, subculture and psychology.

Social Expectation and Role

Linguistics in related areas have pointed out that much of gendered behavior is a kind of learned behavior as a result of the expectation from society. After one’s birth in a certain place, language, culture and society integrate together to give the new member a specific level of foundation or expectation. Charlotte Krolokke’s (2003) statements best underscores 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.

It has been stated before that men and women are different from each other in topic selection in conversation. It is these social values that confine female speakers to certain topics such as child-bearing, personal relationships. Simone de Beauvoir (1950)

has discovered the fact that women are perceived to be 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 requests, or even orders.

For a long time, there existed a social division of different labor for men and women. Men who are considered at the center of society integrate this right to dominate. In contrast, women then, are in a subordinate status (Zhao Ronghui, 2003). Thus, men's activity range is wider than women's, which affects on their different characteristics and language expressions. Men stand for "power, status, dominance", and therefore, their discourse is powerful. While the position of women seem weak, and leads them to use standard language, compliments and polite words to make up and prove their social status.

Due to gender differences, men and women take different responsibilities and roles in the society. Generally, social expectation makes women more concerned about family and children, but makes men more concerned about career, and social and state affairs. The expectation and requirement forming a strong pressure exists in the people's speech, urging people to standardize their utterances. Therefore, the different social roles will lead to gender language which is different for men and women inevitably. Polite, gentle and euphemistic speech embody the feature of female language. Men's language use more affirmation, and is direct and aggressiveness.

Subculture

Current research increasingly shows that gender differences in language may be related to subcultures of men and women. Subculture is a branch of the whole culture, which refers to the various localities and social aspects of group culture resulted from various social and natural factors. That is, different class, ethnicity, religion and living environment can influence the formation of cultural groups of their own characteristics under the united national cultures. Therefore, many scholars believe that gender differences in conversation are reflects of two different subcultures because men and women grow up in different subcultures. The society provides different living experiences to both men and women to assist them learn to learn how to be a man and a woman. This means speech acts are acts of acquisition. Maltz and Borker (1982) point out women use asking questions as a means of continuing the conversation while men regard it as a means of achieving information; women are more willing to discuss and share their own problems with others in order to get support and comfort, while men care more about how to solve problems, they prefer to give suggestions and represent themselves in public. It can be seen that subculture identity is an inevitable reason of gender differences in language.

Psychological Factor

So far, explanations of the influences on gender differences in the speech act are from the perspective of social psychology and linguistics. Men are good at transferring all his power to control others, including women; Women realize that they have less power (Barrie & Henley, 1975). Accordingly, women tend to use more

standard or polite expressions to get self-protection in their speeches. As mentioned earlier, the women prefer to use tag questions, and their self-confidence is lower, related to the lack of an independent spirit. On the other hand, Jennifer Coates (1993) suggests that men tend to think logically, while women tend to be evoked and are likely to think more emotionally. Therefore, women are better at using circumflex language to express intense inner emotions than men in daily life. Thus it can be seen that psychological differences between men and women are important factors, which lead to differences in language use.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Gender differences, as a social phenomenon, are 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 attempt to show and discuss the difference between male language and female language, reflected in vocabulary, syntax, topic-selection and so forth. It also attempts to penetrate to cover the cause of these differences.

The different roles women and women play in social life result in the different skills or strategies they employ in conversation. According to O’Barr and Atkins, what Lakoff has termed “women’s language” would be more appropriately termed “powerless language”, which means this kind of language is less convincing, less intelligent, less competent, and less trustworthy. On the contrary, men’s language is regarded as power because of men’s controlling status in society.

In daily life, women’s speech is different from men’s speech in lexical choice, syntax and topics. In conversation, women are more concerned about the emotion, intimacy, food, dress, and relationships. They try to share their happiness and sadness with their friends. However, men are interested in business, military activities, politics, sport and history, they communicate with others in order to exchange ideas with them.

Suggestions

Through the analysis of gender differences in language, I realize as a language learner, we should not only learn the linguistic basics knowledge about a language, but also know the culture of the language. Thus we can avoid misunderstandings as much as possible.

As a future language teacher, on one hand, we need to know gender differences in language so that we can teach our students the appropriate forms of the utterances. On the other hand, we need to know as much as possible about the speech patterns or styles of men and women, who are native speakers of English. It appears that the field of language and gender research has several important links to the field of TESOL.

Finally, it should be pointed out that there is still much for researchers to investigate and to disclose detailed differences between male and female speakers as well as their specific causes. This is of great value in the field of English teaching and learning as well as cross-cultural exchange.

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