**HOW LANGUAGE DEFINES GENDER**

Research into the many possible relationships, intersections and tensions between language and gender is diverse. It crosses disciplinary boundaries, and, as a bare minimum, could be said to encompass work notionally housed within applied linguistics, linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis, cultural studies, feminist media studies, feminist psychology, gender studies, interactional sociolinguistics, linguistics, mediated stylistics, sociolinguistics, and feminist language reform and media studies.

In methodological terms, there is no single approach that could be said to 'hold the field'. Discursive, poststructural, ethnomethodological, ethnographic, phenomenological, positivist and experimental approaches can all be seen in action during the study of language and gender, producing and reproducing what Susan Speer has described as 'different, and often competing, theoretical and political assumptions about the way discourse, ideology and gender identity should be conceived and understood'. As a result, research in this area can perhaps most usefully be divided into two main areas of study: first, there is a broad and sustained interest in the varieties of speech associated with a particular gender; also a related interest in the social norms and conventions that (re)produce gendered language use (a variety of speech, or sociolect associated with a particular gender which is sometimes called a genderlect).Second, there are studies that focus on ways language can produce and maintain sexism and gender bias, and studies that focus on the contextually specific and locally situated ways in which gender is constructed and operationalized. In this sense, researchers try to understand how language affects the gender binary in society

The study of gender and language in sociolinguistics and gender studies is often said to have begun with Robin Lakoff's 1975 book, Language and Woman's Place, as well as some earlier studies by Lakoff. The study of language and gender has developed greatly since the 1970s. Prominent scholars include Deborah Tannen, Penelope Eckert, Janet Holmes, Mary Bucholtz, Kira Hall, Deborah Cameron, Jane Sunderland and others. The 1995 edited volume Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self is often referred to as a central text on language and gender.

Minimal responses

One of the ways in which the communicative behaviors of men and women differ is in their use of minimal responses, i.e., paralinguistic features such as 'mm' and 'yeah', which is behaviour associated with collaborative language use. Men generally use them less frequently than women, and when they do, it is usually to show agreement, as Don Zimmerman and Candace West's study of turn-taking in conversation indicates. While the above can be true in some contexts and situations, studies that dichotomize the communicative behavior of men and women may run the risk of over-generalization. For example, "minimal responses appearing "throughout streams of talk", such as "mm" or "yeah", may only function to display active listening and interest and are not always signs of "support work", as Fishman claims. They can—as more detailed analysis of minimal responses show—signal understanding, demonstrate agreement, indicate scepticism or a critical attitude, demand clarification or show surprise. In other words, both male and female participants in a conversation can employ these minimal responses for interactive functions, rather than gender-specific functions.

Questions

Some research has argued that men and women differ in their use of questions in conversations. For men, a question is usually a genuine request for information whereas with women it can often be a rhetorical means of engaging the other's conversational contribution or of acquiring attention from others conversationally involved, techniques associated with a collaborative approach to language use. Therefore, women use questions more frequently. However, a study carried out by Alice Freed and Alice Greenwood in 1996 showed that there was no significant difference in the use of questions, such as "you know?" between genders. In writing, however, both genders use rhetorical questions as literary devices. For example, Mark Twain used them in "The War Prayer" to provoke the reader to question his actions and beliefs. Tag questions are frequently used to verify or confirm information, though in women's language they may also be used to avoid making strong statements.

Turn-taking

As the work of Victoria DeFrancisco shows, female linguistic behaviour characteristically encompasses a desire to take turns in conversation with others, which is opposed to men's tendency towards centering on their own point or remaining silent when presented with such implicit offers of conversational turn-taking as are provided by hedges such as "y' know" and "isn't it". This desire for turn-taking gives rise to complex forms of interaction in relation to the more regimented form of turn-taking commonly exhibited by men.

Changing the topic of conversation

According to Bruce Dorval in his study of same-sex friend interaction, males tend to change subject more frequently than females. This difference may well be at the root of the conception that women chatter and talk too much. Goodwin observes that girls and women link their utterances to previous speakers and develop each other's topics, rather than introducing new topics.

However, a study of young American couples and their interactions reveal that while women raise twice as many topics as men, it is the men's topics that are usually taken up and subsequently elaborated in the conversation. An examination of conversational topics pursued by men and women reveals notable differences. Dunbar, Marriot and Duncan found that men display self-promoting conversational behaviors. This can look like discussing achievements at work or competitive leisure activities. Researchers discovered that this behavior increases when women are present in the conversation. Women, however, converse more about personal topics, such as children, family, and health. This social-networking behavior was rarely found in conversations held by older men. These content differences also impact the linguistic features of conversations. One study that examined 8,353 text-message conversations found that women used past tense verbs in conversation more than men, a reflection of their tendency to discuss past events and information related to people. In the same study, men used numbers in conversation more often than women did. These figures supported their discussions of money, sports and the workplace.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is not simply providing information to another person. Instead, scholars define self-disclosure as sharing information with others that they would not normally know or discover. Self-disclosure involves risk and vulnerability on the part of the person sharing the information. Deborah Tannen's work argues that men and women have different views of self-disclosure, that women have a tendency toward self-disclosure, i.e., sharing their problems and experiences with others, often to offer sympathy, which contrasts with men's tendencies to non-self disclosure and professing advice or offering a solution when confronted with another's problems.

Research has been conducted to examine whether self-disclosure in adult friendship differs according to gender and marital status. Sixty-seven women and fifty-three men were asked about intimate and non-intimate self-disclosure to closest same-sex friends. Disclosure to spouse among married respondents was also assessed. Married people's non-intimate disclosure to friends was lower than that of unmarried people, regardless of gender. Married people's intimate disclosure to their spouses was high regardless of gender; in comparison, married men's intimate disclosure to their friends was low, while married women's disclosure to their friends was moderate or even as high as disclosure to their spouses. The results suggest that gender roles are not the only determinant of gender differences in disclosure to friends. Marital status appears to have an important influence on disclosure in friendship for men but not for women. It was concluded that research on gender differences in self-disclosure and friendship has neglected an important variable, that of marital status.

While there are some gendered stereotypes and expectations about self-disclosure, other research shows that people have the ability to still self disclose very clearly regardless of masculine or feminine communication traits. "Sex consistently failed to predict subjects' willingness to self-disclose, both within and across contexts, whereas femininity promoted self-disclosure in the context that was clearly social and expressive in character. Although masculinity failed to exert the expected facilitative impact on self-disclosure within the instrumental context, it nonetheless influenced the results; androgynous subjects, who scored high in both masculinity and femininity, were more self-revealing across contexts than was any other group."

Self-disclosure has also been researched within the context of heterosexual couples, as self-disclosure is considered to be a key factor in facilitating intimacy. For example, American heterosexual couples were studied using various measures twice a year. By using the average scores of both partners, they found that self-disclosure was higher in those couples who remained together at the second administration of the surveys than in those who broke up between two administrations. Similarly, researchers asked heterosexual couples who had just begun dating to complete a self-disclosure measure and to answer the same questionnaire four months later. They found that couples who were still dating four months later reported greater self-disclosure at the initial contact than did those who later broke up. This work shows self-disclosure can be beneficial to facilitating a positive relationship.

Verbal aggression

Aggression can be defined by its three intersecting counterparts: indirect, relational and social. Indirect aggression occurs when the victim is attacked through covert and concealed attempts to cause social suffering. Examples are gossiping, exclusion or ignoring of the victim. Relational aggression, while similar to indirect, is more resolute in its intentions. It can be a threat to terminate a friendship or spreading false rumors. The third type of aggression, social aggression, "is directed toward damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take direct forms such as verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion." This third type has become more common in adolescent, both male and female, behavior.

Dr. M.K. Underwood, leading researcher in child clinical psychology and developmental psychology, began using the term social aggression in several of her experiments. In one study, Underwood followed 250 third-graders and their families in order to understand how anger is communicated in relationships, especially in face-to-face and behind-the-back situations. It was found that technology and electronic communication has become a key factor in social aggression. This discovery has been termed cyber-bullying. In another experiment, social aggression was used to see if verbal and nonverbal behaviors contributed to a person's social value. It was found that those who communicated nonverbal signals were seen as angry and annoyed by their peers. In a third study, the experimenters determined that while socially aggressive students were vastly disliked, they were alleged to be the popular kids and had the highest marked social status. Most research has been based on teacher assessments, case studies and surveys.

For years, all research on aggression focused primarily on males because it was believed females were non-confrontational. Recently however, people have realized that while "boys tend to be more overtly and physically aggressive, girls are more indirectly, socially, and relationally aggressive." In a study done measuring cartoon character's aggressive acts on television, these statistics were found:

76.9% of physical aggression was committed by male characters

23.1% of physical aggression was committed by female characters

37.2% of social aggression was committed by male characters

62.8% of social aggression was committed by female characters

Listening and attentiveness

In a conversation, meaning does not reside in the words spoken, but is filled in by the person listening. Each person decides if they think others are speaking in the spirit of differing status or symmetrical connection. The likelihood that individuals will tend to interpret someone else's words as one or the other depends more on the hearer's own focus, concerns, and habits than on the spirit in which the words were intended.

It appears that women attach more weight than men to the importance of listening in conversation, with its connotations of power to the listener as confidant of the speaker. This attachment of import by women to listening is inferred by women's normally lower rate of interruption – i.e., disrupting the flow of conversation with a topic unrelated to the previous one and by their largely increased use of minimal responses in relation to men. Men, however, interrupt far more frequently with non-related topics, especially in the mixed sex setting and, far from rendering a female speaker's responses minimal, are apt to greet her conversational spotlights with silence, as the work of Victoria DeFrancisco demonstrates

When men talk, women listen and agree. However men tend to misinterpret this agreement, which was intended in a spirit of connection, as a reflection of status and power. A man might conclude that a woman is indecisive or insecure as a result of her listening and attempts of acknowledgment. When in all actuality, a woman's reasons for behaving this way have nothing to do with her attitudes toward her knowledge, but are a result of her attitudes toward her relationships. The act of giving information frames the speaker with a higher status, while the act of listening frames the listener as lower. However, when women listen to men, they are not necessarily thinking in terms of status, but in terms of connection and support.

Heterosexual relationships

As described above, there are certain stereotypes society places on the way men and women communicate. Men are stereotyped to be more of a public speaker and leader, while women are stereotyped to talk more in private among their family and friends. For women, society views their use of communication as a way to express feelings and emotions. For men, society views their use of communication as a way to express power and negotiate status among other individuals. There are also certain societal stereotypes about how men and women communicate within a heterosexual marriage or relationship. When a man and a woman are communicating within their relationship, the traditional language roles are altered. The man becomes more passive and the woman becomes more active. A man's stereotypical silent communication style is often disappointing for women, while a woman's emotionally articulate communication style is often seen as aggravating for a man. This creates the assumption that women and men have opposing communication styles, therefore creating society's cliche that men and women don't understand each other.

Dominance versus subjection

This, in turn, suggests a dichotomy between a male desire for conversational dominance – noted by Helena Leet-Pellegrini with reference to male experts speaking more verbosely than their female counterparts – and a female aspiration to group conversational participation. One corollary of this is, according to Jennifer Coates, that males are afforded more attention in the context of the classroom and that this can lead to their gaining more attention in scientific and technical subjects, which in turn can lead to their achieving better success in those areas, ultimately leading to their having more power in a technocratic society.

Conversation is not the only area where power is an important aspect of the male/female dynamic. Power is reflected in every aspect of communication from what the actual topic of the communication, to the ways in which it is communicated. Women are typically less concerned with power and more concerned with forming and maintaining relationships, whereas men are more concerned with their status. Girls and women feel it is crucial that they be liked by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on symmetrical connection. Boys and men feel it is crucial that they be respected by their peers, as form of involvement that focuses on asymmetrical status. These differences in priorities are reflected in the ways in which men and women communicate. A woman's communication will tend to be more focused on building and maintaining relationships. Men on the other hand, will place a higher priority on power, their communication styles will reflect their desire to maintain their status in the relationship.

According to Tannen's research, men tend to tell stories as another way to maintain their status. Primarily, men tell jokes, or stories that focus on themselves. Women on the other hand, are less concerned with their own power, and therefore their stories revolve not around themselves, but around others. By putting themselves on the same level as those around them, women attempt to downplay their part in their own stories, which strengthens their connections to those around them.

Politeness

Lakoff identified three forms of politeness: formal, deference, and camaraderie. Women's language is characterized by formal and deference politeness, whereas men's language is exemplified by camaraderie.

There is a generalization about conservativeness and politeness in women's speech. It is commonly believed that women are gentle, while men are rough and rude. Since there is no evidence for the total accuracy of this perception, researchers have tried to examine the reasons behind it. Statistics show a pattern that women tend to use more "standard" variable of the language. For example, in the case of negative concord, e.g., I didn't do anything vs. I didn't do nothing, women usually use the standard form. Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of the linguistic marketplace. According to this concept, different varieties of language have different values. When people want to be accepted in a diplomatic organization, they need to have a range of knowledge to show their competency. Possessing the right language is as important as the right style of dress. Both of these manners have social values. While Bourdieu focuses on the diplomatic corps, it would be true if people want to be accepted in other contexts such as an urban ghetto. The market that one wants to engage with has a profound effect on the value of the variation of language they may use. The relations of each gender to linguistic markets are different. A research on the pronunciation of English in Norwich has shown that women's usage is considerably more conservative regarding the standard variation of the language they speak. This research provides the pieces of evidence that women's exclusion from the workplace has led to this variation. As women in some cases have not had the same position as men and their opportunities to secure these positions have been fewer, they have tried to use more "valuable" variations of the language. It can be the standard one, or the polite version of it, or the so-called "right" one.

Gender Differences in Political Communication

Situational context is another factor that affects verbal and non-verbal communication behaviors based on gender. In male-dominated fields, such as politics, women employ a balance of masculine and feminine behaviors to appear both competent and likable to an audience of male peers. In a study that reviewed speeches given by female members of the United States Congress throughout the 2010s, congresswomen performed masculine verbal behavior (i.e., accusations, attacks on character) similarly to male members of Congress, but congresswomen performed more feminine non-verbal behaviors (i.e.., smiling, facial expressions, varied tone of voice) compared to their male counterparts. Gender differences in political communication also appear in political arenas outside of the United States. In a study of speeches given by members of the United Kingdom's Parliament, female parliamentarians were found to use concrete examples or personal anecdotal evidence to support their arguments more than male parliamentarians. Male parliamentarians, on the other hand, were found to base their arguments in abstract descriptions of groups or issues. Additionally, the presence of a female MP increased female parliamentarians' participation in political debates.

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