

Language and Gender



Approaches to Language

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Language and gender

- Differences in the way men and women speak: linguistic behaviour of men and women differs in all speech communities
- Sex vs. Gender in Sociolinguistics:
- Sex: biological characteristics
- Gender: distinguish individuals based on socio-cultural behaviour, including speech; social construct

Grammatical gender

- Differences among languages: grammatical gender
- Chinese: no gender marking in pronouns
- English: 3rd person pronouns in sing. → *he, she, it*
- French: 3rd person pronouns in sing. & plural: *ils, elles, lui, elle*

Grammatical gender

- Some languages encode the gender of the speaker in the pronoun system (Holmes, 2008)
- Example from Japanese: a number of words for 'I' (relevant to degree of formality)
- Women use the more formal variants (e.g. *atashi* & *watashi*) vs. men use more casual forms (e.g. *ore*, *boku*)
- Modern society: Japanese women challenge such restrictions

Discuss

- Do English pronouns encode the gender of the speaker?

Language and Sexism

Doctor, n....a man of great learning.

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE DICTIONARY, 1947

- *A businessman is aggressive; a businesswoman is pushy. A businessman is good on details; she's picky...He follows through; she doesn't know when to quit. He stands firm; she's hard...He isn't afraid to say what is on his mind; she's mouthy. He exercises authority diligently; she's power mad. He's closemouthed; she's secretive. He climbed the ladder of success; she slept her way to the top. 'HOW TO TELL A BUSINESSMAN FROM A BUSINESSWOMAN,' The Balloon, Graduate School of Management, UCLA, 1976 (cited in Fromkin et al: 323)*

Language and Sexism

Words of a language are not intrinsically good or bad:

Reflection of societal or individual values, attitudes, positive or negative

- Language reflects sexism
- 20th century dictionaries: 'manly courage', 'masculine charm' vs. 'womanish tears', 'feminine wiles'
- Modern dictionaries: avoid sexist language

Language and Sexism

Discuss:

a. My cousin is a professor/doctor/steelworker/chancellor of the university

- Is the cousin a man or a woman?

b. My cousin is a nurse/a primary school teacher/house worker

- Is the cousin a man or a woman?

Language and Sexism

Words for women: *dish, piece, piece of tail, bunny, chick, doll, cow, bitch, pussy, slut*

- Very few sexual terms for men: they are not pejorative in the same way; *boy toy, jock, hunk, stud muffin* (Fromkin et al, 2014)

Discuss the following examples

Mr vs. Miss, Mrs, Ms; bachelor vs. spinster; sir vs. madam; master vs. mistress

Marked and unmarked linguistic forms

- Asymmetry between male and female linguistic forms: male/female pairs of words (Fromkin et al, 2014)
- Unmarked form: male form
- Marked form: usually female form
- English: heir **heir~~ess~~**; aviator **aviat~~rix~~**; Robert **Robert~~a~~**, equestrian **equestri~~enne~~**
- Female form: add bound morpheme (derivation)
- Nouns require particular affixes to make them feminine

Marked and unmarked linguistic forms

- Unmarked terms: general reference to the professions, e.g. flying, riding, unmarked terms, i.e. *aviator, equestrian, actor* (exception: *widow **widower***)
- Marked forms: female gender
- English 3rd person pronouns, unmarked: *he, him, his*

Example:

- a. *Everybody had better pay **his** fee next time*
- b. *Everybody had better pay **her** fee next time*

(Fromkin et al: 324)

Marked and unmarked linguistic forms

- Neutralise pronouns (genderless 3rd person pronouns): use of *they*, *po*, *tey*, *ve*, *xe*

Every teenager loves their first car (Fromkin et al: 324)

- Objections from teachers
- Speakers would not use *po*, *tey*, *ve*, *xe*

'If the English language had been properly organised....then there would be a word which meant both 'he' and 'she', and I could write, 'If John or Mary comes, heesh will want to play tennis', which would save a lot of trouble.' A. A. MILNE, *The Christopher Robin Birthday Book*, 1930 (cited in Fromkin et al, 324)

Marked and unmarked linguistic forms

- Women have varied roles in the society: Many male forms are used to refer to either sex: *authors, actors, poets, firefighters, police officers*
- Exception: *duchess, princess*

Gender differences in language use

- Gender differences in language use: reflection of social status or power differences
- Hierarchical society: men are more powerful than women in different levels; Gender-related linguistic differences: one example of more substantial differences reflecting the general social hierarchy (Holmes, 2008)
- Bengali society: a younger person should not use a superior person's first name to address him/her
 - A wife (being subordinate to her husband) is not allowed to use his name

Gender differences in language use

- In some communities: profound differences between men's and women's speech
- Gender-specific linguistic forms: gender-specific social roles

Gender-preferential speech features

Western urban communities: men and women do not use completely different linguistic forms; women's and men's social role overlap

- Men and women use different frequencies of the same forms (Holmes, 2008)
- Women use more *-ing* pronunciations and fewer *-in'* pronunciations than men: *swimming, typing*
- Sydney: men & women may pronounce the initial sound in *thing* as [f], BUT men > women
- Gender-preferential forms vs. gender exclusive forms

Gender-preferential speech features

- Women: tendency to use more of the standard, 'prestige' forms than men do
- Men: tendency to use more of the vernacular forms than women do (Mesthrie et al, 2009)
- Trudgill (1983): men tend to lead language change → new vernacular forms & women lead change towards new prestige forms.

Gender-preferential speech features

- When women use a linguistic form more often than men: standard form (overtly prestigious form)
- When men use a linguistic form more often than women: vernacular form (usually it is not cited as the 'correct' form)
- This pattern is consistent in Western speech communities world-wide
- Trudgill (1983): 'the single most consistent finding to emerge from sociolinguistic studies over the past 20 years'.

Gender-preferential speech features

- This pattern is found in young children's speech
New England village (USA): boys used more *-in'* forms and the girls more *-ing* forms.
- Similar findings: Boston, Edinburgh, etc.
- Why does female and male speech differ in this way? Why do women use more standard forms than men?

Explanations of women's linguistic behaviour

A. the social status explanation

- women use more prestige forms because they are more status-conscious, and so more aware of the social significance of language
- Standard forms: high social status – women claim high status
- Supportive evidence: interview data from women in New York and Norwich

Explanations of women's linguistic behaviour

- Can the social status claim account for women's speech patterns?
- Claim: Women who are not in paid employment → claim high social status by using more standard forms
- Counterevidence (American study): Women in paid employment used more standard forms (interaction with people who used more standard forms) than those working in home (interaction with other women who stayed home: preference for vernacular forms)
- This explanation is not generally accepted

Explanations of women's linguistic behaviour

B. 'A woman's place is in the home.'

- Women are expected to behave 'better' than men
- Generally: boys are allowed more freedom than girls, etc.
- Women: modelling correct behaviour in the community
- Society: women are expected to speak more correctly than men → models for children's speech

Explanations of women's linguistic behaviour

Problematic claim: vernacular forms → informal, relaxed speech; standard forms → more formal interactions

- Do mothers use standard speech forms in their intimate interactions with their children? NO DATA FROM MOTHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS
- Existing data: formal tape-recorded interviews

Explanations of women's linguistic behaviour

C. Vernacular forms: machismo

- Why do men prefer vernacular forms?
- Working-class speech has connotations of masculinity and toughness: more appealing to men
- Norwich men: they claimed they used more vernacular forms than they actually did, while the women did not
- Men: vernacular forms are regarded positively, highly valued
- Women: standard forms tend to be associated with female values; middle-class speech and femininity

Explanations of women's linguistic behaviour

Preference for vernacular forms: possibly a reaction to overly influential female norms (e.g. female teachers & the use of standard forms): consistent with sociolinguistic evidence

- However, New Zealand study: Women avoid vernacular forms → association with 'loose morals'
- Why do all speakers from all social classes use more vernacular forms in less formal contexts?
- Why should forms most typically associated with informal relaxed contexts be identified as 'masculine'? (Holmes, 2008)

Alternative explanations of women's speech patterns

How are women categorised?

- Husband's occupation: major criterion in assigning women to a particular social class
- BUT: not all women marry men from the same social class
- Educated, employed woman: expected to use more standard forms; reflect their social background
- Miscategorisation: possible explanation of the women's speech behaviour

Alternative explanations of women's speech patterns

The sociolinguistic interview

- Social dialect studies: interviewers are middle-class well-educated academics
- Participants: cooperation → accommodate to the speech of the person they are talking to; their speech resembles that of their interlocutor
- Women: more cooperative than men in conversations
- Possible explanation for women's increased use of standard forms: greater accommodation to the middle-class speech of the interviewers

Alternative explanations of women's speech patterns

Possible explanation for men's increased use of vernacular forms: working-class men distinguish themselves from middle-class academics (interviewer)

- Another explanation for men's use of vernacular forms: the role of the interview context → Many male interviewers
- Women: male stranger, highly educated member of the dominant group in the society
- Men: interviewer → same gender group; interview context is more comfortable for men than for women
- Male solidarity > formality of the context

Women's language (Lakoff, 1975)

Lakoff: linguistic features expressing uncertainty, tentativeness and lack of confidence

- Lexical hedges/fillers, e.g. you know, sort of, well, you see
- tag questions, e.g. she's very nice, isn't she?
- rising intonation on declaratives, e.g. it's really good?
- "empty" adjectives, e.g. charming, divine, cute
- Intensifiers, such as *just* & *so*, e.g. I like him so much
- hypercorrect grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard forms
- 'Superpolite' forms, e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms
- avoidance of strong swearwords, e.g. fudge, my goodness
- emphatic stress e.g. it was a BRILLIANT performance
- Precise colour terms, e.g. aquamarine

(Holmes, 2008: 298)

Women's language (Lakoff, 1975)

Lakoff (1975): women's language use → enforces their subordinate status in society

- Two main types of modifiers: evidence of an unconfident speaker
- hedging devices (they reduce the force or certainty of an utterance; they signal lack of confidence): i.e. lexical devices, tag questions, question intonation, superpolite forms, euphemisms (they weaken the strength of an assertion)

Women's language (Lakoff, 1975)

boosting devices (strengthen the use of an assertion): i.e. intensifiers, emphatic stress; they express the speaker's anticipation that the addressee may remain unconvinced; they are used to supply extra reassurance

- Summary: hedging devices → women express uncertainty vs. intensifying devices → women wish to persuade their addressee to take them seriously
- Lakoff: hedges & boosters → they express women's lack of confidence

Women's language (Lakoff, 1975)

HOWEVER: Many linguistic forms considered to be features of women's speech have complex functions (e.g. tags are often used as politeness devices) (Holmes, 2008)

Gender in interaction

- Interaction: talking time
- Interruptions
- Conversational feedback
- Gossip

Interaction: Talking time

Stereotype of women: talkative sex

- However, research evidence: various contexts, mainly non-private ones (meetings, conferences) → men dominate the talking time
- Men usually talk more in non-private contexts: talking may increase your status

Interruptions

Cross-gender interactions: almost all the interruptions were from males (see e.g. Holmes 2008: 306-307)

- Men interrupt others more than women do in different settings: departmental/staff meetings, doctor-patient interactions
- Young boys: start practicing interruptions for dominating the floor
- Girls: they are socialised to expect to be interrupted (e.g. daughters are interrupted most by fathers & mothers); they give up the floor with little or no protest

Conversational feedback

Research studies

Women: cooperative conversationalists → they provide more encouraging, supportive and positive feedback than men do (e.g. noises such as *mm* & *mhm*)

- Men: more competitive & less supportive of others
- Women: they are more likely than men to develop the ideas of a previous speaker rather than challenge them

Explanations of the interactional patterns

- Influence of context & socialisation patterns
- Women: small group interaction in private contexts
- Aim of interaction: solidarity stressing, i.e. maintain good social relations; disagreement is avoided (compliments, politeness)
- Norms for male interaction: public oriented interaction → contradiction & disagreement is more likely than agreement
- Speakers compete for the floor and for attention: this pattern is also observed in private contexts (men's talk)

Gossip

Gossip: relaxed talk between people in informal contexts

- Western society: gossip= 'idle talk' → women's characteristic → main function: affirm solidarity
- Women's gossip: personal problems, feelings, personal experiences, relationships
- Purpose: relieve feelings and reinforce shared values, emphasis on the affective message vs. referential content

Gossip

Male equivalent of women's gossip: difficult to identify

- Men: focus on things & activities, e.g. sports, cars, possessions
- Focus on information and facts vs. feelings & reactions
- Frequent disagreement, challenge the previous speaker's statements
- Men: more competitive conversationalists

Dominance theory/ 'deficit' model

Lakoff's claims: a deficit model of women's language use; the way women speak is inadequate in several respects

- Social inequalities between women and men: female speaking style denied them access to power (Mesthrie et al, 2009)
- Dominance position on women's and men's language
- Men's interactional behaviour: the greater degree of power more generally available to men: 'there are definite and patterned ways in which the power and dominance enjoyed by men in other contexts are exercised in their conversational interaction with women' (Mesthrie et al, 2009: 227).

Dominance theory/ 'deficit' model

- Language behaviour reflects male dominance
- However: this proposal is based on assumptions and stereotypes about gender
- Insufficient evidence; variation within Western communities, e.g. contradictory research evidence from Malagasy communities: women's speech is more direct than men's, women take more confrontational roles (Holmes, 2008)
- Men in Western societies may interact differently in different contexts
- Women's communicative style: not necessarily an example of hesitancy; many features may signal inclusiveness

Difference theory

- Men and women constitute different sociolinguistic 'gender subcultures'
- Holmes (2008: 310): different socialisation & acculturation patterns; 'If we learn ways of talking mainly in single gender peer groups, then the patterns we learn are likely to be gender-specific'
- Miscommunication between men & women: different expectations men & women have of the function of the interaction and the ways that are appropriate to be conducted

Difference theory

Tannen: 'women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence' (1990: 42; cited in Mesthrie et al: 228)

Social constructivist theory

A more dynamic approach: Gender is a social construct; approaching the construction of gender as a process rather than as a given category → individuals are constantly 'doing' gender

- Phonological/lexical/syntactic selection: social information; every linguistic choice is meaningful
- Every time we speak: reinforce existing norms or challenge existing norms
- Approaching gender identity as a construction, not as a fixed category: account for examples where females adopt to masculine contexts and vice versa by using features associated with masculinity and femininity

Social constructivist theory

Examples:

- Women in the police force: masculine image; cool distant style, they do not smile much and they talk 'tough'
- Men in clothing shops/hairstyling salons: they often construct a more feminine identity there than in the pub; they tend to use more affectionate terms of address, they avoid strong swear words → cooperative discourse, facilitative, responsive conversationalists (Holmes, 2008)



Discussion

Do you think men and women speak differently, e.g. in informal contexts, in single-sex groups, in mixed groups, in formal contexts?

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