Language and Gender

Do men and women speak differently?

Language and Gender: Background

But I remember that I am writing in England, I remember that I was married in England, & I ask if a woman’s marriage obligations in this country provide for her private opinion of her husband’s principles? No! They charge her unreservedly to love, honour, and obey him.

Count Fosco (an aristocratic Italian criminal) in The Woman in White

Wilkie Collins (1860:632)
If only I had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival’s best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the rising sun— a long, hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours, like the famous highwayman’s ride to York. Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must respect the housekeeper’s options, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way.

Words recorded in fictional diary by Marian Halcombe: Wilkie Collins {male author} *The Woman in White* (1860: 221)

Language is itself a human creation not a given. (Saussure)

Dominance?

The first non-sexist Bible to be published in Britain was launched yesterday (1994). The revisers have systematically changed expressions such as ‘any man’ to ‘anyone’, but have kept the masculine for God, on the grounds that this is faithful to the original.

Romaine (1994:101)

Proxemics:

In conversation, both men and women touch women more than they touch men, another sign of feminine lack of dominance.

Chaika (1990: 91)
Male Standards?

- Women and their speech have been measured against male standards and found to be deviant and deficient, just as not too long ago there was something 'wrong' with working class speech, Black speech etc.
  
  Romaine (ibid: 100-1)

- ‘The generic he’ or S/he

- The presumption has been that words importing the masculine gender includes females e.g Early Man (unless the persons are obviously female – nurses? Etc – is this acceptable?)

The Early Years

In the learning of sex-trait stereotypes…: Williams, Giles and Edwards (1977) have shown that children as young as five years of age may be quite aware of the socially determined stereotypes concerning characteristics of men and women.

(Edwards in Coupland; ibid 285)

What might these characteristics be? Language models? From where are they acquired? Does the education system challenge or reinforce them?
Perceptions

Many female occupations derive from male terms: manager-manageress; actor, poet etc & many names. Another major issue is the extent (if it can be done at all) that we can distinguish between innate (nature) & environmental (nurture) differences & influences.

• Linked to these are traditional perceptions of women’s roles as housewives etc & notions handed down culturally (Adam & Eve – Adam’s rib etc) as women being derived from men.

• In fact for the first 7 weeks of development the basic human form is female.

• Some female names are diminutives of men’s Henrietta, Georgette, Pauline etc and we might conclude that these practices are symbolic of an order in which men come first. However….

Only words?

• 1. man-made
• 2. as a mammal, early man breast-fed his young
• 3. manpower
• 4. Mr Legg runs a company in partnership with his wife
• 5. lady doctor
• 6. Camerman
• 7. actress authoress murderess stewardess
• Heroes/ heroines? (Iceland slogan: Because mothers are heroes)

Are these words gender neutral?
• 7. the local Girl Guides were manning the sideshows
• 8. I'll have my girl type that immediately
• 9. The old masters are well represented in the gallery
• 10. one-man show
• 11. statesman
• 12. Chairman

When all other things are equal- Women more likely than men to be addressed by first names or lady, miss or even babe. Is this OK – mildly offensive etc?

Can anyone give any examples of situations in which they have experienced such things?

Old favourites?
Headmaster - Headteacher
Bachelor – spinster  Master - mistress
Conductor - conductress – manager manageress
Widow

It may seem perfectly natural that feminine forms should be derived from masculines and not vice versa Ger. *Erbe*, Russ. *Naslednik > Erbin, naslednica*. After all it is a man’s world, but there is one sad exception. In all Indo-European languages, the feminine form is primary, the masculine widower always secondary. (*Witwer* from *Witwe* (Ger) *veuf/veuve* (French))

It is not hard to account for the unique primacy of the feminine form. In a patriarchal society, the status of the woman depends on that of her husband. Hence widowhood automatically leads to changes in her social position. The man’s standing, however, is not so affected if the wife dies.

Lockwood, W.B. (1969:185)

Some key points:

• Is there such a thing as women’s language?

• Women use more colour words—*aquamarine, mauve, beige, lavender & magenta* etc – most men do not.

• Women said to have own vocabulary for emphasizing things—*adorable, charming, divine, lovely*

Blond
Blonde [fem]
STANDARD FORMS

• Women use more standard forms than men—men use more ‘stigmatized forms’ e.g. double negative etc I ain’t got none etc and tend to have stronger regional accents.

• Wardhaugh (1993:314) cites the example of schoolgirls in Scotland who pronounce the /t/ in words like water and got more often than boys who prefer to substitute a glottal stop /ʔ/. butter/bottle/department.

Women and standard speech

• Women, on average, are more standard their speech than men.
• Why? 3 main explanations proposed.
  ✤ Status
  ✤ Solidarity
  ✤ Conservatism

Status
• Status: women speak more ‘correctly’ because they are sensitive to the social implications of speech:
  Women use more prestige variants than men (who use more vernacular forms)
• BUT: women shift more according to style
• Idea is that women more status conscious because higher standards for female behavior, female lifestyle (focused on home), little inherent status
Women and standard speech

**Solidarity:**

- Solidarity: women do not experience the same pressure as men to stick to the vernacular
- Social networks for women more loosely-knit; tighter for men

**Conservatism:**

- Conservatism: women stick to older forms because they are more conservative
- Women more aware of prestige forms of language?
- Studies show women as agents of linguistic change when new changes are the issue.

### Stereotypes about ways men & women talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEN</th>
<th>WOMEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loud topics:</strong> cars/football/drinking</td>
<td><strong>topics:</strong> soaps/relationships/clothes etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong &amp; silent</td>
<td>Talkative expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief/blunt/to the point</td>
<td>Tangential (going off topic) 3rd person exp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mumble/no enunciation</td>
<td>Superficial more standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manipulative (direct)</td>
<td>Mumble/speak softly class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-emotional content/Fact-based content</td>
<td>Chatty/Catty bigger vocab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st person experiences</td>
<td>Gossip elegant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swearing</td>
<td>Exaggerate manipulative (indirect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grunt</td>
<td>Laugh/smile self-effacing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lower classes talk less correctly</td>
<td>Cooperative/diplomatic baby-talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower voices/deeper</td>
<td>High rising intonation hedging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>argumentative</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Men & Women: Issues

• Male 'norms' are further reinforced by repeated images of hard-men on TV & Cinema – from John Wayne onwards.

. Trudgill (1974 in Coupland 1997: 289) also found that some males may associate standard speech with femininity, and has also suggested that middle-class speech may carry feminine connotations because schools, which generally support middle-class speech, are staffed largely by women.

• However, Romaine argues that it is alleged that women have more status consciousness & concern for politeness – but do these factors explain the tendency?

• It is also stated that as the majority of primary school teachers are women, they play a leading role in standardizing language norms. Can you recall any examples of this process?

• Trudgill (1972) did note, however, that although covert prestige is primarily a male phenomenon, it is also evident among younger females (Edwards, in Coupland: ibid 288).

Stereotypes of male speech

• Use deeper voices/lower in pitch

• Swear and use taboo language

• More assertive in group interaction (interruptions, few tag questions)

• Intonation falls, rather than rises

• Topics are ‘traditional’ male topics like business, politics, economics

• Use non-standard speech, even middle class

• Use explicit commands (Gimme the pliers)
Stereotypes of Female speech

- Minimal responses: *mhm, yeah, mmmm*
- Talk more than men
- Use more tag questions - who says which?
  - *The crisis in the Middle East is terrible.*
  - *The crisis in the Middle East is terrible, isn’t it?*
- Women use more interrogatives
- Women use more hedges (*sort of, kind of*)
- Use more (super) polite speech: *would you please*

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**ADVERTISING**

According to Cunningham & Roberts… most advertising aimed at women is ineffective. Advertisers consistently misjudge the feminine psyche, which appreciates supportive & altruistic behaviour over more masculine values like self-interest, says Cunningham. ‘It’s that men & women are motivated by different values, but men assume women are the same’.

The Guardian (14:04:2007:Work:01)
TAG QUESTIONS

• Greater use of tag questions? - *It’s a nice day, isn’t it?*
  However, some studies have shown men use a greater no of tags

• Earlier researchers suggested that tag questions might imply lack of confidence & tentativeness.

• Tannen, Cameron have commented that though women may SOUND vague but they are seeking cooperation & non-confrontational contact

• Tag questions also constitute as frequent form of phatic communication, which women engage in more than men - chit-chat? - it can also be seen as supportive

Tag Types

• Tag questions have different functions:

  • **Modal** tags: request information or confirmation of information of which the speaker is uncertain (speaker oriented)
    ✷ *You were missing last week, weren’t you?*
    ✷ *But you’ve been in Reading longer than that, haven’t you?*

  • **Affective** tags: are used to indicate concern for the addressee:
    ✷ Negative politeness: softeners:
      ✷ *Open the door for me, could you?*
    ✷ Positive politeness: positive interest, solidarity, facilitative
      • *His portraits are quite static by comparison, aren’t they?*
      • *Quite a nice room to sit in actually, isn’t it?*
### Grammatical structures

- Women use tag qs more freq. – *don’t they?*

- Modal verbs [*could*] & modal advbs [*probably, possibly*] and tentative verbs like *think* & *suppose* occur more often in women’s lang

- Men more likely to use commands – when women use them more likely to be interrogatives – *would you like to pass me that book?* Or as hypotheticals-*I wonder if you could pass me that book etc*

### Hypothesis and Results

- **Hypothesis:** While it is apparently not true that women use more tag questions than men, maybe they use more facilitative tags than men (because women are more cooperative?)

- **Results** show that men and women use different kinds of tags; women’s are more facilitative, men’s are modal.
INTONATION

• Intonation- women tend to have a high rising tone

• Romaine (1994) argues that we must see women’s language in relation to who holds power in society (often men) & that women’s speech is perceived as secondary or as ‘*a deviation that has to be explained*’) CF working class speech and ‘norms’.

• Others –less powerful- may argue Academic disciplines are male-centric & Eurocentric

• Romaine states: some of the features thought to be part of ‘women’s language’ can be found in use by males when those males are in a subordinate position.

Covert & overt prestige

• In both America & Britain..... an association between working-class speech and masculinity and ‘toughness’ has been noted...The covert prestige of working-class speech obviously attracts men rather than women. (Edwards in Coupland; 1997: 284- 5 )

• Trudgill (1974 in Coupland 1997: 289) also found that some males may associate standard speech with femininity, and has also suggested that middle-class speech may carry feminine connotations because schools, which generally support middle-class speech, are staffed largely by women.

• Haemophilia & red-green colour blindness only affect males & are among the many disabilities that counter cultural stereotype that women are fragile & passive
LANGUAGE & GENDER

At discourse level

• Men are more likely to interrupt

• Men often reject topics intro’d by women: women will talk about topics intro’d by men

• Women more likely to use supportive minimal vocalisations like mm & yeah

Women more likely to initiative conversations— they succeed less often because males less willing to co-operate

Men more likely to use familiar forms of address even where rel status of speakers suggest that a formal, impersonal tone is more appropriate.

You talk too much...........

Some speakers (again, including many women) may also speak at a lower volume, & try to be succinct so as not to take up more meeting time than necessary. Barbara & Gene Eakins examined tape recordings of 7 univ. faculty meetings & found that, with 1 exceptn, the men spoke more often & without exceptn, spoke longer. The men’s turns ranged from 10.66 to 17.07 seconds. The longest contribution by a women was still shorter than the shortest contribution by a man.

Tannen (1995: 279-80)
Lexical choices

- Women more likely to use evaluative adjectives like wonderful, brilliant and great
- Adverbs of degree like so & very more common in women’s speech
- Adjectives describing approx. amounts like about & around more common in w’s utterances
- Reduplicated forms like teeny-weeny & itsy-bitsy are assoc with women rather than men – men see them as baby-talk so inappropriate for them choo-choo bow bow

Lexical cont’d

- Men were thought to use slang & swearing more frequently- but recent studies suggest that this is changing? Ladette culture? Assertiveness?
- Women’s speech is characterised by the frequency of politeness markers like please & thanks
- SOURCE:
Language, Men and Women

- Men use a higher frequency of nonstandard speech (when social class is stable)
  - Sex differences in speech
  - Standard and nonstandard speech

- Women are the linguistic innovators.
  - Women are more conservative in their use of certain language features, especially with stable features that reflect changes in progress for a long time.
  - Women are more innovative with newer language changes.

Terminology

Simone de Beauvoir: ‘One is not born a woman, one becomes one’.

- Sex is a biological distinction, while gender is socially constructed categories based on sex.

- Gender: the complex of social, cultural and psychological factors that surround sex; contrasted with sex as biological attribute.

- Does the language between the sexes differ?
  Research says YES!
Sex and social groups

- Early linguistic research did not treat women as a social group, often did not include women when studying a variety

- Social Groups have in common:
  - neighbourhood OR have a recognized meeting Place
  - Distinctive and recognizable sub-culture
  - Members of the group acknowledge the existence of the group; belong to the group is part of their identity

- Are women a social group?

Early Research

- (USA) Fischer interviewed 24 children, half boys, half girls, ranging in age from 3-10. He focused on the [N] linguistic variable in the pronunciation of -ing.

- Fischer (1958) investigated childrearing in the New England area of the USA

- Three sets of results:
  - girls more standard than boys
  - model boy more standard than typical boy
  - model boy varies standard behaviour by formality level
Boys and Girls

• Comparison of children by gender showed that girls tended to use more word-final -ing than boys, who used more of the nonstandard -in’

Different Types of Boys
• Model boy: worked well in school, popular, considerate, nice
• Typical boy: strong, mischievous, bold

Formality Level
• Model boy uses uses more -in’ as the formality of the situation decreased.
• Additional observation: verbs associated with everyday activities (hit, swim, chew) more likely to end with -in’ than verbs like criticize, correct, read, and visit.

Outright Misconceptions
• Stereotypical notions of male or female styles that are NOT SUPPORTED BY THE EVIDENCE

❖ Women talk more A bestselling book claimed that women say 20k words a day while men only 7k (Louise Brizendine: The Female Brain: clinical professor of psychiatry at Univ of California)
❖ This is disputed & totals of words believed to be much closer
❖ Empirical studies of talk between men & women in the 70s &80s found women producing more well-timed ‘minimal responses’ such as ‘oh’ & ‘mm’ & asking more questions’ I.e doing more legwork in conversations. Sunderland (2006:10-11)

❖ Men use more taboo words??

❖ Women use more tag questions?
What do studies show?

• Men interrupt women in mixed-sex conversation; control topics, silence women

• Women use more “minimal responses”, ask more questions

• Men talk more; use more imperative forms

• Women use more politeness forms

• Men tend to use more vernacular and women tend to use more standard speech

Interruptions

• Overlap: slight over-anticipation by the next speaker; begin to speak at the very end of the other person’s turn

• Interruption: next speaker starts talking at a point which is clearly NOT the last word

• Same sex conversations: more overlaps than interruptions

• Mixed sex conversations: men interrupt women; overlaps virtually disappear
Strategies for Politeness

- **Positive politeness** strategy: a strategy that seeks to create a positive relationship with the hearer
  - *Dear Mary, could you open the window?*
  - *You’re so strong. Could you open the window?*

- **Negative politeness** strategy: a strategy that seeks to minimize the threat to the hearer's face
  - *Excuse me, could you open the window?*
  - *Sir, could you open the window?*
  - *Could you open the window?*

Conclusions

Do women and men speak differently?
- Yes, in many ways
- But they also share many patterns
- E.g., cooperative and competitive strategies are not mutually exclusive and are not reserved for one or the other gender
- Why do they speak differently?
- because of different gender roles and socialization patterns
- because of power relations
- because gender is such a crucial component of identity
- Why language and gender rather than language and sex?
- Because there is plenty of evidence that most gender specific patterns of linguistic behaviour are culture-specific and situation-specific, thus a reflection of gender as a social construct rather than sex as a biological category.
References:

Coupland N (1997) *Sociolinguistics*, Macmillan