



Language and Female Gender: An Apercu

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Abstract: Language studies are undertaken in varied ways in the contemporary period as in the past. Language and its cogitations have been probed by various scholars in manifold dimensions. Deliberations on language, along with its multitudes of expressions, have a steady route in many disciplines. The functions of language and the extensity of its expression were resolutely pursued by feminist scholars. Multiple approaches and studies on language in feministic discipline gesture to understand and explore language, and its different dimensions of expressions of women. There are wide ranges of studies on language and on the relationship between gender and language. Certain empirical studies concede that language used by women are characterised by certain features. There are many ethnographic studies as well that validate this point. The paper attempts to brief the studies and explorations in the field of language and gender taken up by few sociologists, social scientists and theoreticians.

Keywords: Language, gender, female, feminist, conversation, communication

Introduction

Many researches have been undertaken in the field of language based on the variable of gender. These researchers diligently study the vocabulary, tone and pitch, intensions, cooperation and politeness, etc., in the day to day conversations of men and women. Anthropological linguist, Gal, notices that male-female differences in speech are seen in every society. But the nature of the differences is diverse. It occurs in different parts of the linguistic system like phonology, pragmatics, syntax, lexicon etc. (181). Researchers coined

several terms, based on their analyses. Language analysts like West and Zimmerman see politeness, hesitancy, and silence as gender linked (111). Lakoff speaks about a “women’s language”, “a language restricted in use to women” (14). Lakoff gives six characteristic features for a women’s language that will be discussed later. Crosby and Nyquist study the characteristic features of “women’s language” examined by Lakoff, and gives us the term “the female register” (314). As conceived by them, both men and women may use the female register. It is not exclusively used by women, but rather it embodies the role of women in society. The female register is both expressive and non-assertive (Crosby and Nyquist 314). Kramer speaks about a “genderlect”, a language variety based on the speaker’s gender/sex. The term was extensively used and popularised by Deborah Tannen in her *You Just don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Tannen uses the term to describe inherent differences in the ways different genders communicate. Tannen observes that women and men have different aims and strategies in communication. Tannen says “if women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, and men speak and hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different genderlects” (18). Mulac talks about a *gender-linked language* (441). Mulac and his associates investigated male and female language use in speech, referring to its patterns of results as *Gender Linked Language Effect*. The *Gender Linked Language Effect* was the result of Mulac’s and his colleagues’ investigation dealing with gender differences in American English language behaviour, and the effects of those differences. Mulac tested and substantiated four different theories that combine to support the effect. The four different theories are as follows:

1. The language behaviour of women and men is subtly different.
2. Perceptions of women and men differ, based on their language.
3. Language differences are implicated in perceptions of women and men.
4. The Gender Linked Language Effect is similar to, but independent of gender stereotypes. (Mulac 442)

There are different parameters to analyse the differences in male and female languages. Indeed, diverse disciplines tend to overlap with each other. Feminist studies, rooted in language differences, find it hard to incorporate any specific discipline into its studies since every diverse discipline seem to provide promising tools for analysing gender differences in language.

Language and Gender

Otto Jespersen's *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* is worthy to mention as it is the first of the kind of study to examine the relationship between gender and language. Some of the characteristic features of women's language, as pointed out by Jespersen, are: the language is less inventive, limited to a smaller vocabulary, and women show a fondness for hyperbole and favours adverbs of intensity; for example "pretty good". Lakoff shares a similar view. Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* is a seminal work in the field of language and gender. Lakoff states some specifications of 'women's language' (42):

the overall effect of 'women's language'-meaning both language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone- is this: it submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, on the one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it; and, when a woman is being discussed, by treating her as an object- sexual or otherwise- but never a serious person with individual views. (42)

According to Lakoff, a "women's language" (14) shows up in all levels of English grammar. Lakoff illustrates six characteristic features of women's language. Firstly, it is visible in the choice of lexical items (for eg, using the word 'mauve' to name a pinkish shade of purple). It is observed that women's choice of colour is far more precisely different than men's. Lakoff justifies that men are unconcerned about such trivial matters. The second one is, women use weaker expletives when compared to men. For example, women use words like 'divine' or 'lovely' whereas men use stronger expletives like 'terrific' or 'great'. Third, is the use of tag questions. Tag questions allow women to subdue an assertive tone and inform their politeness and lack of intensity in their arguments. The fourth one is women's use of hedges like 'sort of' or 'kind of', which mitigates the assertiveness in their statement. Lakoff believes that women use hedges as a part of the general fact that women's speech should sound more polite. Frequent use of the word 'so' is the fifth characteristic feature. Observing politeness in women's conversations forms the sixth feature. Lakoff believes that women's speech is devised to prevent the expressions of strong statements (51). Women's language, again, refers to language describing women. Lakoff cites words like 'lady' and 'mistress' that has a negative connotation. For these glaring differences in the use of language, Lakoff suggests that women should learn men's linguistic strategies and switch over to a 'neutral language' (74). Although Lakoff's study has ignited new trends in assessing language difference, some critics argue that her analysis has reinforced sexist stereotypes.

Dale Spender comes up with another argument. She believes that gender difference in language occurs as women are dominated by men. Women are forced to seek and express themselves in a male language. Spender gives an example of the male naming of the word 'motherhood' which has a denotative meaning of feminine fulfilment. Spender argues that not every woman considers motherhood as an epitome of feminine fulfilment. She terms the language controlled by men as *he/man language* (149). The *he/man language* gives us the male reality of the world. Spender cites how male and female sexuality is defined through words like potent, virile etc., which is a desirable trait for a sexually active male. Whereas, sexually active women are given names of repudiation like nymphomaniac, baller, bitch, etc. Spender altercates how asymmetry is constructed in language. The language represents men in a positive way and women in a negative way. Spender maintains that semantics is only one of the forms through which sexism operates and women share a negative semantic space (20). Language locks women, and for those who wish not to be compared to men, there is nowhere to go. Spender argues that the only solution is to alter the semantic rules of the language controlled by men.

As soon as we learn words we find ourselves outside them, says Sheila Rowbotham (1973 a: 32). This makes us aliens. This makes us silent. This makes us vulnerable. We need a language which constructs the reality of women's autonomy, women's strength, women's power. With such a language we will not be a muted group. (190)

Hence it is necessary to liberate the language from male control and generate a new 'feminine reality' (Spender 163).

Deborah Tannen is yet another bright figure in the field of language and gender. Her book, *You Just Don't Understand! Men and Women in Conversation*, sheds light on how certain differences could be judged in male and female languages. Tannen believes that women and men use different languages. But, Tannen's explanation is quite contrary to what Lakoff and Spender have observed. She argues that a different style in male and female conversation occur as both of them are put to a different peer world. Boys and girls, when they grew up, are thrown into a different world of words. Hence, the differences in their language are the result of different frameworks they are exposed to. This could be understood with reference to Tannen's idea that any action has two levels of meaning: a message and a meta message. If we take the act of helping as an example, the message coded in this particular act is indeed the act of helping. The meta message communicates the relationship between the participants and their attitudes towards one another. The meta message is further classified into two- symmetric meta message and asymmetric meta message. The

symmetric meta message for an act of helping is a generous move that shows caring and the asymmetric meta message conveys information about hierarchy and different statuses. Women are more comfortable with both giving and receiving help, and men, sensitive to their dynamic status, are comfortable in giving help, but not receiving it. Tannen argues that women are mostly associated with symmetric, and men with asymmetric meta language. Studies on interactions of men's and women's styles claim that men are more competitive and prone to conflict, while women are more cooperative in their interaction, and observe attachment and affection. Women, generally, believe that conflict is a threat to their relationships and try to avoid it at all costs. But for men, conflicts, necessarily, negotiate their status. Tannen, also, points out the differences in the linguistic strategies adopted by men and women:

If a linguistic strategy is used by a woman, it is seen as powerless; if it is done by a man, it is seen as powerful. Women and men feel interrupted by each other because of the differences in what they are talking to accomplish with talk. Men who approach conversation as a contest are likely to expend effort not to support the other's talk but to lead the conversation in another direction, perhaps one in which they can take centre stage by telling a story or joke or displaying knowledge. (Tannen, *Understand* 107)

Tannen concludes that in the male-female constellation, it is women who are at a social and cultural disadvantage. She strongly believes that both the groups can conceive the opposite style of language by acquiring additional strategies of communication. Susan Speer studies how researchers in the gender and language field have interpreted male-female linguistic differences in three main ways: first, the 'deficit' framework which could be understood in terms of Lakoff's observation; second, the 'dominance' framework which points to Dale Spender's studies; and third, the 'difference' framework which refers to Tannen's examination.

Empirical analyses: Men and women in conversation

Evidence from a range of studies show that gender differences in communicative competence are evident in male and female speakers' use of particular conversational strategies. Mary Bucholtz gives a review of a study of politeness strategies in the interaction of New Zealand women undertaken by Janet Holmes. Holmes sees that women seem to be considering the face needs of their conversational partners by using more positive politeness hedges, more facilitative tag questions, and few interruptions (29). Observing through a Lakoffian lense, these strategies indicate powerlessness. But Holmes acknowledges that women's

interactional dexterity works to men's advantage in conversations due to a general male "lack of interactive sensitivity" (qtd. in Bucholtz 29). Thus analysing the New Zealand women's conversational styles, Holmes gives a powerful counterpoint that positions women as skilled and agentive language users. But, it is to be noted that individual women belonging to different cultural groups do not necessarily conform to these characterisations. On the other hand, these studies create an awareness and appreciation of women's interactional practices. A study on the use of politeness strategies used by men and women is carried out by Penelope Brown. The empirical research is based on Mayan community. Brown's work explicates that women are more attentive to the face needs of others, and they use the extremes of positive and negative politeness (Coates 107). There are various empirical studies, based on women and politeness, carried out in different social and cultural groups like the young generation in Hong Kong, American English speakers and Chinese speakers, Javanese women, Persian Community etc. These analyses conclude that women use more positive politeness strategies. But these researches have acknowledged the fact that the socio-cultural factors of each community have profoundly influenced the conclusions and observations (Keikhaire and Zahar 63). Thus, for a fair analysis, it is advisable to link women's or men's politeness behaviours to the respective social structure and culture of their specific community.

There is a common assumption that women use more hedges as their conversations are considered as 'tentative'. As already mentioned, Lakoff connects women's use of hedges with their unassertive tone in conversations. Different empirical researches are carried out based on this premise. Coates gives more accuracy to Holme's work as she notes the differences between diverse functions carried out by the use of hedges. Holmes' records show that women used hedges more frequently to assert confidence and less frequently to express uncertainty (Coates 88-89). Holmes' analysis challenges Lakoff's observation that women's use of hedges pinpoints their lack of confidence. Coates explains a study undertaken by Goodwin on the use of commands and directives in a playgroup of boys and girls. The analysis throws light upon the ways boys use 'aggravated' directives to establish their status difference, and girls use 'mitigated' directives to accommodate their peers in decision making (95).

Conclusion

There are ample ethnographic studies based on the conversational competence or the dominance of men and women in interaction. These studies prove that women have shown fewer tendencies to interrupt men's conversation. West and Zimmerman's analysis supports the premise that women interrupted less in their

interactions with men (Coates 114). Majority of the empirical studies state that women use particular vocabularies and adopt particular behaviour and attitude in their interactions. However, some researches show that it is not gender that necessarily index difference in language, but it is the variable of power that permeates their conversation. Hence, while undertaking a study on language by considering gender as a variable, it could be concluded that it is the cultural baggage that we engineered for a long period that prompts us to conclude that women are weaker in employing conversational strategies.

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