

DISCOURSE AND GENDER

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Abstract

It is well known and widely accepted fact that men and women speak differently. But why do they speak differently? Is it because of their gender or social circumstances or social position? Language and Gender theorists have tried to study various reasons behind this difference. In this paper an attempt has been made to identify a few differences on the basis of their conversational patterns. It has been tried to find out whether both men and women use different languages or only their style or their pattern is different. Textual analysis of Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House, Harold Pinter's Birthday Party and Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey etc. has been performed along with various quotes and proverbs in English language. The results show that the basic difference is not of gender rather of the position. Women and men use different vocabulary, they use grammar differently, women are more polite, their style is conversational and that of men's dominating.

Keywords: Gender, discourse, vocabulary, grammar, politeness etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well known and widely accepted fact that men and women speak differently. But why do they speak differently? Is it because of their gender or social circumstances or social position? Do women and men use different languages? How does being a woman or a man affect the ways in which we talk or are talked about? Although interest in these questions goes back at least hundred years, it was not until the 1970s that gender and discourse emerged as a recognized field of inquiry. The year 1975 saw the publication of three books that proved pivotal: Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place*, Mary Ritchie Key's *Male/ Female Language*, and Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley's edited volume *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. These pioneering works emerged during the feminist movement of the 1970's, as scholars began to question both the identification of male norms as human norms, and the biological determination of women's and men's behaviour. A conceptual split was posited between biological 'sex' and socio-cultural constructs of 'gender'. Apart from differentiating between women's and men's language, these studies identified the role of language in creating and maintaining social inequality between women and men.

It is commonly understood today that gender is accomplished in discourse. What is considered about as 'womanly' and 'manly' behaviour is not dictated by biology, but rather is socially constructed, as Simon De Beauvoir (2011) puts it: "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" (283). And a fundamental domain in which gender is constructed is language use. Social constructions of gender are not neutral. They are implicated in asymmetrical power relations in societies which systematically subordinate women's interests to men's.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the focus is on some of the questions that excite scholars today across many disciplinary boundaries, such as those between anthropology, linguistics, literature, philosophy, psychology, sociology and gender studies. The research paper will begin by illustrating the presence of gender in language, and consider certain baseless prejudices about women's language. Next, the focus will be on the textual analysis of how women and men are talked about. Finally, the difference in women's and men's speech will be documented, drawing conclusions about how analysis of talk contributes to our understanding of relations between women and men in social life.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All Western languages are "male engendered, male constituted and male dominated" (Toril, 153). Discourse, it is asserted, in terms proposed by Jacques Lacan is 'phallogocentric', is constituted by linguistic norms framed by men for both men and women. Women have been denied a voice of their own. They have been reduced to a 'muted group'. In his book *Man Made Language* (1980), Dale Spender argues that language is not a neutral medium but an instrument through which patriarchy finds expressions (Barry, 127). English speaking feminists, for example, have drawn attention to demonstrable and specific evidences that a male bias is encoded in our linguistic conventions. Instances, include the use of gender indefinite referent 'he' where the sex of the

antecedent is unknown, i.e., the use of ‘man’ or ‘mankind’ for human beings in general, of ‘chairman’ and ‘spokesperson’ for people of either sex and of the pronoun ‘he’ and ‘his’ to refer to ostensibly gender-neutral nouns such as ‘God’, ‘human being’, ‘child’, ‘inventor’, ‘author’, ‘poet’, etc. Research on gender and language structure has demonstrated numerous ways in which women are ignored, trivialized and deprecated by the words used to describe them. Women are denied an autonomous existence through titles that distinguish them on the basis of their marital status – ‘Mrs’ vs ‘Miss’, ‘Senora’ vs ‘Senorita’, ‘Madame’ vs ‘Mademoiselle’. Such language practices show a broad pattern of sexism which reinforces the secondary status of women in social organization. Through our acceptance and use (though unconscious) of a gender conscious or gender-discriminating language, we help perpetuate the status quo. Feminists, however, have been fighting for gender-neutral alternatives. Thanks to their efforts there have been noticeable changes in English vocabulary, for instance, the use of ‘spokesperson’, ‘mail carrier’ instead of ‘spokesman’, ‘mailman’; ‘doctor’, ‘actor’, ‘author’ for both men and women and the use of ‘s/he’ (he or she) or ‘they’ as a generic instead of ‘he’.

Andocentric speech, which assumes that men are more important than women, is often accompanied by prejudices that do the real harm. Folk linguists, early grammarians and writers have harboured and extended certain notions about women’s language which have been proved baseless by recent studies. Let us take a look.

3.1 Vocabulary

Women’s vocabulary was thought to be ephemeral in nature. Women differ from men, according to Jespersen (1922), in their fondness for hyperbole which results in their excessive use of certain adverbial forms. This belief about women’s language is gently mocked by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (1813), in the speech of Isabella Thorpe:

‘My attachments are always *excessively* strong’. ‘I must confess there is something *amazingly* insipid about her I am so vexed with all men for not admiring her! - I scold them all *amazingly* about it’. (*Northanger Abbey*, Ch. 6, my italics)

It is clearly significant that it is Isabella who is flirtatious selfish and shallow, who uses these adverbials and not Catherine, the heroine.

Lord Chesterfield’s, writing in *The World* of 5 December 1754 makes fun of this linguistic feature:

The adjective *vast* and its adverb *vastly*, mean anything and are fashionable words of the most fashionable people. A fine woman ... is *vastly* obliged or *vastly* offended, *vastly* glad or *vastly* sorry. Large objects are *vastly* great, small ones are *vastly* little (Italics mine) (Coates, 18)

The adverb, ‘so’ was also claimed as having something eternally feminine about it. Jespersen (1922) gives us examples of ‘ladies usage’: “It is so lovely!”, “he is so charming!”, “Thank you so much!”, “I’m so glad you’ve come!”. His ‘explanation’ for this sex preferential usage is that “women much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say ...” (Coates, 19)

3.2 Swearing and Taboo language

A whistler sailor, a crowing hen and a swearing woman ought all three to go to hell together (American proverb)

The idea that women’s language is more polite, more refined and clean has been current for many centuries: Consider (a) “Oh dear, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again”.

(b) “Shit, you’ve put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again”.

It is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as part of ‘women’s language’, the second as ‘men’s language’ (Lakoff, 10)

Lakoff summarises her position later by saying that women don’t use off-colour or indelicate expressions; women are experts at euphemism. It is widely held today that those writers who claim to describe women’s language as more polite indirectly prescribe how women ought to talk. Avoidance of swearing, and of coarse words is held up to female speakers as the ideal to be aimed at, and not an innate feminine trait.

3.3 Grammar

Men of letters in the eighteenth century believed that women were frequently guilty of incorrect usage of grammar. Lord Chesterfield (1741) remarked, “most women and all ordinary people in general speak in open defiance of all grammar”. Henry Tinely tells Catherine Morland that “the usual style of letter writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars” which are “a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar” (Coates, 27). Jespersen (1922) seems to agree here as we have seen, he believed that women often produce half-finished sentences, However, modern day linguists believe that such linguistic defects cannot be attributed to women’s

mental inferiority. These were a result of women's lesser access to literacy and education than men in bygone days.

3.4 Verbosity

Many women, many words, many geese, many turds.

(English Proverb)

There is an age old belief that women talk too much. English literature is filled with characters who substantiate the stereotype of the talkative woman. Rosalind, in *As You Like It* (Act III, Scene 2, 264), says "do you know I am a woman? When I think, I *must* speak" Dion in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (11.4.1-3) advises:

Come, ladies, shall we talk a round? as men

Do walk a mile, women should talk an hour

After supper; tis their exercise.

The other side of the coin to women's verbosity is the image of the silent woman, which is often held up as an ideal: "silence is the best ornament of a woman" (English proverb). However, modern linguists deconstruct the 'stereotype of the garrulous woman': the talkativeness of women has been gauged in comparisons not with men but with silence, when silence is the desired state for women then any talk in which a woman engages can be too much.

Such biases and the sexist language patterning (listed earlier) are products of patriarchal expectations, ideologies and discursive practices. The focus now will be on actual instances of text and talk which build up the discourses of masculinity and femininity, define normative behaviour for men and women, constructing and always reproducing the difference and inequality between men and women.

Linda Christian-Smith, in her analysis of the discourse of femininity, in US romance novels studies the conditions under which these texts are produced and consumed. In some US middle schools and junior high schools, she examined how teachers use novels for instructional purposes. She found that teachers' selection of romance novels for girls and adventure and mystery books for boys encouraged 'gendered' reading practices among their students. Through their sex - categorical - selections teachers endorsed the normative images of femininity and masculinity that the novels espouse.

Dorothy Smith notes that Images of femininity in western fashion magazines become the locus of social interaction and activity among women. It influences what they talk about, how they shop, and how they 'work' on themselves to resemble the textual images they see. In Western societies, a woman's success in conforming to prevailing textual images of femininity is significant for her chances of attracting a heterosexual partner. Her looks determine whether a man can proudly display her in public and so establish his status with other men.

On the basis of her interviews with a group of Australian girls in their early teens, Patricia Palmer Gillard argues that girls want to make decisions about their socio-economic future based on the characterizations and actions of the women they see in television soap operas. As one of her interviewers put it, "If it worked for her (a TV soap opera character), being woman, it might work for me (Dijk, 122-123). The problem with such programs or magazines and romance novels is that these depict women mainly as wives and mothers, offering girls a very limited view of options available to them as adults. Women are presented as 'consumers' of commodities never as 'workers' and acknowledged 'producers'. The coda of femininity in these texts is fundamentally concerned with maintaining power relationships between men and women by encouraging women to unassertive and passive acceptance of male dominance. This paper will explore later the ideology which affects female and male patterns of speech.

Roger Fowler illustrates the effects of such discursive practices by giving an example. He reports that British newspapers categorize women and men very differently through the noun phrases used to describe them. Women are described not as individual beings but as relative to men, for example as 'wives', 'sisters', 'daughters' and 'mothers'. But it is very unusual to see corresponding descriptions of men.

Still other studies of discourse focus on how gender is constructed through the means of assembling texts such as sentences, grammatical structures and genres. These studies are less concerned with the content of discourse than with its form. For example, moving beyond the level of words, Deborah Cameron (1990) addresses the sentence structure of British newspaper reports of violence against women. Her analysis of one such story shows that these reports depicted the man affected by the rape of his partner as the grammatical subject of the main clauses and mentioned the woman who was raped at the end, describing her in relation to her husband:

A man who suffered head injuries when attacked by two men who broke into his home ... was pinned down on the bed by intruders who took it in turns to rape his wife (Dijk, 124)

Through these means of assembling their ostensibly 'objective' reports, newspapers describe events from the point of view of the husband whose wife was raped not the-woman herself. In a related study of rape report (In *The Sun*, a British tabloid), Kate Clark (1992) observes that these texts tend to obscure the guilt of the rapist and transfer blame to the victim or someone else. For example, they use passive structures that attribute the responsibility of the rapist's actions to someone else: "Sex killer John Steed was set on the path to evil by seeing his mother raped when he was a little boy." They even describe the victim of the rape in ways that might be read as 'excusing' the rapist, for example, as an "unmarried mum" or a "blonde divorcee" (Dijk, 124).

Textual analysis of media reports reveals competing ways of representing social life, which work insidiously to maintain inequality between the sexes. Michelle Lazar (1993) analyzes a pair of Singapore government advertisements. The ostensible purpose of these ads is to change the conservative attitudes of Asian men, who prefer not to marry their intellectual peers. While the texts appear to redress the issue of male chauvinism and promote gender equality, on the whole these jointly reproduce the status quo. For example, they use 'but' - a disclaimer to qualify their support of a woman's career interest: "It's wonderful to have a career and financial independence. But is your self-sufficiency giving men a hard time?" or later "Are you women giving men the wrong idea" and a concluding advice: "be more relaxed and approachable" (Dijk, 125). The sexist discourse, observes Lazar, subtly shifts the origins of the problem and responsibility for change from men to women.

Textual analysis also shows that particular genres or discourse focus on reader's or viewer's reading or viewing in specific ways. For example, Paul Thibault (1988) notes that magazines for women in the West exploit the genre of personal columns inviting girls and women for advice from experts, on their sexual and emotional dilemmas. This genre says Thibault (1988), serves to standardize and universalize the behaviour and experiences of women in relation to dominant western ideas about heterosexual relations.

To this point the paper has been focusing on the textual analysis of how women and men are talked about. Studies of form of the texts, the contents of texts, and the conditions under which texts are produced show how women are described, depicted, categorized and evaluated as different from and unequal to men. But talk about women and men is only part of the picture. There is also the issue of how women and men talk. This issue will now be addressed further.

Women and men differ linguistically in a wide variety of ways. The earliest researchers, especially anthropologists, concentrated on differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar. Quite different pronunciations of certain words in male and female speech have been documented in some North American Indian languages, such as Gros Ventre and Koasati. Women in tribal communities such as Carib Indians are dissuaded from using certain taboo words and have a different vocabulary for sex related terms (also true of various other communities). However, this view of language is far too narrow. Researchers today are more interested in differing patterns of speech which are found across cultures and in conversational interaction rather than in isolated linguistic variables. They study how men and women differ in terms of their communicative competence, in other words, in their sense of what is appropriate for them as speakers. These linguistic differences are not 'natural' or 'essential' in nature but a 'product', and a 'reflection' of the unequal role of women and men in society. These in turn reinforce social inequality by assuring men's dominance and women's subordination in an act as casual as everyday conversation. Let's take a look.

3.5 Turn taking in conversation: interruptions and topic control.

In an influential study Zimmerman and West found that "men interrupted women more than the reverse in thirty one dyadic conversations" (Schiffrin, 448) recorded at various public places. They found that men rarely interrupt one another; it is when they are talking to women that they use interruptions - a display of conversational dominance and usurpation of speaking rights. Conversely, the fact that women used no overlaps in conversation with men (while they did use some in same-sex groups) suggests that women are concerned not to violate the man's turn but wait until he's finished. Jennifer Coates explains that male speakers dominate the conversation because they use ---- a "style of interaction based on power while female speakers prefer an "interactional style based on solidarity and support (Coates, 110-112).

Fishman (1983) examined conversation of heterosexual couples in their homes, and found that women perform more of the conversational 'support work' required to sustain interaction with their partners: they produced more listening cues (*mhm, uhuh*), asked more questions, used *you know* and attention-getting beginnings (*this is interesting*) more frequently, and actively pursued topics raised by men. On the other hand, men were more likely to not respond to turns and topics initiated by women and to make more declarative statements. Fisherman argues:

Woman's supportive role in private conversations reflects and reproduces sex-based hierarchies of power within the public sphere (Schiffrin, 550).

3.6 Tag Questions

Lakoff (1975) suggested that women express themselves in a more tentative way than men. She defines women's language as 'non-forceful' and identifies linguistic forms which mitigate or weaken the force of an utterance: 'weaker expletives' (*oh, dear* versus *damn*) trivializing adjectives (*divine* versus *great*) and the use of tag questions which are associated with tentativeness. According to her, women use sentences (*The crisis in the Middle East is terrible isn't it?*) which contain tag questions more than men.

3.7 Questions

Research findings suggest that women use interrogative forms more than men, usually to elicit a response from them. In the following extract (taken from Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*) note how Petey is forced into conversation by Meg's use of questions:

(Meg gives Petey a bowl of cornflakes. He sits at the table, props up his paper and starts to eat.)

Meg: Are they nice ?

Petey: Very nice

Meg: I thought they, be nice. You got your papers?

Petey: Yes

Meg: Is it good?

Petey: Not bad

Meg: What does it say?

Petey: Nothing much.

Women's excessive use of interrogative forms is taken to reflect women's relative weakness in interactive situations: they exploit questions and tag questions in order to keep conversation going.

3.8 Commands and Directives

Goodwin (1980) observed the group play of girls and boys in Philadelphia street and noticed that the- boys used different sorts of directives from the girls. The boys used explicit commands:

Micheal: Gimme the pilers

Huey: Get off my steps (Schiffrin, 551)

Boys organize their play hierarchically developing asymmetrical arrangements between their playmates and themselves, girls employ directives (such as 'let's') that minimize differences among playmates:

Martha: Let's go around Subs and Suds

Bea: Let's ask her 'Do you have any bottles ? (Schiffrin, 554)

3.9 Politeness

Brown (1980) examined politeness phenomenon in a Mayan community based on Goffman's (1967) concept of 'face'. Tenejapan women used strategies which were more polite than those of men. For example, the use of irony and rhetorical questions in place of direct criticism (*Just why would you know how to sew? implying of source you wouldn't*), which both de-emphasized negative messages and emphasized in group solidarity. In contrast, men's communicative style was characterized by a lack of attention to 'face', and the presence of such features as sex related joking and a "preaching/ declaiming style."

Brown (1982) defines gender differences in language as linguistic choices, "communicative strategies" used by men and women to achieve certain socially motivated ends - the "cultural" or "difference" approach. Conceiving of these differences simply as "men's style" or "women's style" implies "a separate but equal relationship" between the two. However, it is West and Zimmerman's (1983) "power" or "dominance" approach which incorporates power into the analysis of gender and discourse, is more widely accepted (Schiffrin, 554).

What has been characterized as 'women's language' features do not feature necessarily in the speech of all women; more characteristic of the speech of women with a lower social status than the speech of educated professional women. On the basis of this correlation, O'Barr and Atkins rename the linguistic features normally associated with women's speech as "powerless language." They argue that "powerless language" has been confused with "women's language" because, in societies like ours, women are usually less powerful than men (Coates, 114). The use of such a language does not only reflect but also reinforces the lower power and prestige ascribed to women in society.

3.10 Swearing and Taboo Language

It has been traditionally believed that there is also difference between swearing and the use of vulgar language. Phrases like 'ladylike' behaviour 'swearing like a trooper' clearly point out to the belief that swearing is a habit of men. Jespersen (1922) is of the view that women have an instinct to be dissuaded from using rough, coarse language and preference for some refined or indirect expressions. Lakoff (1975) claims that while men use stronger expletives, women use politer versions such as 'damn' and 'oh dear' (Coates, 108)

4. CONCLUSION

So what are the options before women? Certain groups of women (e.g. those in the professions or in politics) have accepted the norms of the dominant group, use swear and taboo words and have adopted a more assertive style in group interaction. But 'assimilation' implies the loss of women's identity. Other women have refused to accept men's definitions and are redefining female characteristics positively. Women's less assertive, more cooperative style in group interaction is being re-valued positively and conversely men's style is being criticized.

The adoption of gender neutral language and the concept of ‘androgyny’ (an integration of male and female) is being advocated.

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