

Do men and women speak differently?

The most common hypothesis in the field of language and gender is that men and women use language differently. Western society constructs ideas of 'male' and 'female' as diametrically opposed, hence the assumption that men and women are polarised in most aspects of life, including the way they speak (Cameron, 2007: 14-17). I will explore the main findings in this area of sociolinguistic research, and evaluate central explanatory models used in interpretation, to assess how far this common belief is supported by evidence. Due to the abundance of studies in this area, to retain depth and focus I mainly concentrate on the genders' amount of talk, and usage of standard forms and hedging devices, with reference to the ways in which any similarities or differences in these aspects of discourse in males and females can be related to their socially constructed roles as men and women.

In her engaging book *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, Deborah Cameron argues that the most sensationalised research findings are those that find greatest disparity between the sexes. She asserts that 'in relation to men and women, our most basic stereotypical expectation is simply that they will be different', and there is also a belief that this is 'natural' (2007: 16), and studies finding no substantial differences are less likely to be published (2007: 17). 'The Gender Similarities Hypothesis', in which Janet Hyde calibrated data from a range of research, found striking evidence to prove that 'in studies of verbal abilities and behaviour, the differences between men and women were slight' (2005, cited in Cameron, 2007: 43-44).

However, many individual studies have found that the genders use language differently in particular contexts. In mixed-sex conversation men talk twice as much as women, which surprises many who have never questioned the folklinguistic 'truism' that women chatter constantly while men can hardly get a word in edgeways (Wareing, 2001:76). It is perhaps therefore logical that 'women give more back channel support than men', having twice as much listening time in which to make minimal responses ('supportive' sounds such as 'ah' or 'mm') (Wareing, 2001: 77). Males succeed in dominating the floor largely by making 96% of the interruptions, so even if a female obtains the space to speak, she is unlikely to retain it for long (Zimmerman and West, 1975, cited in Holmes, 1998: 326).

This is not true in all situations. Victoria DeFrancisco found evidence that women speak more than men in the domestic sphere, usually in an attempt to introduce a topic of conversation (1998, cited in Coates, 2004: 120-21). However, men are more successful than women in getting their topics accepted, and also commit more turn-taking violations such as interruption and non-response (Holmes, 1998: 121). Therefore men's comparatively reduced quantity of talk, in this context, is not due to a lack of agency but a lack of co-operation: males consistently refuse to acquiesce to the females' choice of topic, and stymie their attempts by being silent or speaking over them. Thus men maintain

their seat of power whether they are dominating through talk, or through screening women's discourse.

Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor also researched domestic discourse, and studied the structure of dinnertime talk in two-parent families. They focused on the family unit due to its central role in 'negotiating, maintaining, transforming, and socialising gender identities' (2001: 98). Ochs and Taylor were specifically interested in the kind of mealtime talk that created a narrative, perhaps about what had happened to a family member that day, and they identified three main roles in these narratives: the narrator, the protagonist, and the primary recipient. The narrator also often doubled as the protagonist, and 82 per cent of the time parents were the primary recipients, with fathers being preferred over mothers (Ochs and Taylor, 2001:105). Interestingly, both parents colluded in this as mothers frequently nominated fathers for this role if they did not position themselves thus (*ibid.*). Fathers were least often protagonists and rarely shared happenings from their life with their children or partners (*ibid.*), so their 'past actions, thoughts, and feelings were less often exposed to the scrutiny of others', making them less vulnerable (Ochs and Taylor, 2001: 102). In the mealtime context, women offered or facilitated narratives involving their own lives, or the lives of their children, to the male, placing him in the position of judge. Therefore Ochs and Taylor conclude that mothers 'play a pivotal role in enacting and socialising a hegemonic activity system in which fathers are regularly reinstated as arbiters of conduct' (2001: 117). DeFrancisco's study revealed a similar pattern, whereby males 'vet' potential subjects for discourse and only sanction those that they deem acceptable.

Robin Tolmach Lakoff observes that 'the ability of one party in a discourse to prevent another from fully participating arises out of the disparate powers and roles of each' (2001: 26). She also notes that excessive talk is not the only method of controlling discourse, as non-response is a more subtle method of silencing – silencing by silence (Tolmach Lakoff, 2001: 27). This highlights the key point that men, as the dominant gender, can use both words and silence to their advantage whilst women are judged and made invisible by those same forces. However, gender is not the only factor affecting amount of talk. As Deborah Cameron states, 'the more direct link is with status' (2001: 118) – gender is hierarchical, with men generally being viewed as higher status, but status is also dependent upon social class, age, ethnicity, and various other factors (Cameron, 2001:119). Social class has proven to be a greater influence than gender in some areas of language use. Janet Holmes asserts that, especially in the lowest and highest social groups, women's speech is more similar to that of men in the same group than that of women in other groups (1998: 196), and agrees with Cameron that gendered language differences are 'just one aspect of more pervasive linguistic differences in the society reflecting social status or power differences' (1998:166).

Peter Trudgill states that the most consistent finding of research into gender and language use is that women use more standard forms than men, whatever social group they belong to (Holmes, 1998: 170). Contrastingly, however, in her study of American

adolescents Penelope Eckert discovered that girls employed greater 'linguistic variability' than boys (2003: 393). This is corroborated by research in Canada identifying females as 'frontrunners in the use of innovative forms', indicating more overall variation in women's speech (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy, 2004: 497). Females, as compared to males, use a higher degree of both standard English (including pronunciation, lexis, grammar, and, in written discourse, spelling) and new linguistic forms.

There are several possible explanations for males' greater use of vernacular. Women could be more status-conscious than men, due to their relative lack of it, and may use more standard speech forms as a method of gaining greater status (Holmes, 1998: 171). Women also may use more standard forms as a way of retaining their societal value, as 'society tends to expect "better" behaviour from women' (Holmes, 1998: 172). Men possibly prefer vernacular forms because of the connotations of machismo and masculinity, but this is only a partial explanation as it does not elucidate where these connotations originate from (Holmes, 1998: 174-75). It may simply be that as the ostensible 'creators' of language and social norms, men are permitted to break the rules precisely because they are their rules to break. For a woman to speak in the vernacular may be seen as 'unladylike', but not because there is anything inherently masculine about non-standard forms, simply because she is transgressing the norms she is supposed to uphold.

The importance of this 'obedience' in women has been proven by other studies, such as Judith Baxter's, which found evidence that popular girls who flaunted their popularity were seen as transgressing feminine norms, and were punished for it (Baxter, cited in Cameron, 2001: 67). A study of female MPs resulted in similar findings: male MPs made far more illegal interventions – almost ten times as many - and as a result females contributed only two thirds as much as their male contemporaries (Sylvia Shaw, 1999, cited in Cameron, 2001: 128). Women's adherence to the laws of Parliament disadvantaged them, but where men and women broke the same rules, women were more likely to be censured for their disobedience (*ibid.*: 129).

It is clear that men and women do not use language in entirely different ways, but use the same forms in different quantities and contexts, and with varied results. One area where this is most apparent is in the use of hedges (mediating words or phrases such as 'you know' or 'sort of') and tag questions (statements appended with queries). Robin Lakoff hypothesised that hedges are more frequent in women's speech (Holmes, 1998: 314), and Wareing agrees that this has been supported by some studies (2001: 77), but the evidence is varied. Lakoff insisted that hedging devices are used to express uncertainty, but further analysis has identified several functions of tags and hedges, employed differently by men and women (Holmes, 1998: 316; 319). In most contexts, women have a tendency to emphasise the polite or affective qualities of tags, whereas men use them to express genuine uncertainty (*ibid.*: 320). Put simply, men use tag questions to check that the information they have is correct, whereas for women they are to open the floor or soften a potentially critical remark. This focus on women as more sensitive

conversationalists has been highlighted by several studies, and all-female discourse is often described as co-operative, supportive, and topically coherent (ibid.: 332).

I have summarised some of the most notable findings in linguistic research, but these are not sufficient to assess *why* men and women use language in the ways they do. Interpretive models are necessary to explain the relationship between the form and the function of discourse, and whilst there are as many unique interpretations as there are interpreters, it is widely accepted that there are three such models. The dominance model sees power differences between the genders as the fundamental cause of linguistic variation and builds an interpretation based on this imbalance, whereas the difference model claims that males and females develop different styles of discourse due to being segregated at pivotal points in their lives (Wareing, 2001: 79). Finally, the dynamic, or social constructionist, model foregrounds the idea that 'gender is not a static, add-on characteristic of speakers, but is something that is *accomplished* in talk every time we speak' (Coates, 2004: 7). In the dynamic model, gender is only one factor affecting variation, interacting with others such as age, social class, and ethnicity. Both the dominance and difference models are generally considered to be outdated, with most commentators acknowledging that the social system of gender is about both dominance and difference (Cameron, 2001: 78). Much early research assumed that women, and 'Women's Language' by extension, had an inherent deficit which made them different, and lesser, than men (Coates, 2004: 6). This is implicit in the lack of demarcation of a 'Men's Language': men's language is THE language, against which all other language use is judged. Jennifer Coates notes that although this 'deficit model' has been abandoned by sociolinguists, it is still a view the general public often subscribe to when perpetuating gender 'truisms' (2004: 7).

It is evident that men and women's spoken discourse differs in many ways, but not all. Studies cannot agree on precisely which features vary, or what functions these features serve, but an obvious explanation for this diversity is that 'although we remain male and female in every context, our roles *as* male and female vary from one situation to another', and our linguistic behaviour reflects that variation (Cameron, 2001: 51). It is also true that men and women may become different because they are treated unequally rather than being treated unequally due to any innate difference (Cameron, 2001: 12). Cameron also highlights the fact that 'men and women may differ in their patterns of language use because they are engaged in different activities or are playing different conversational roles' (2001: 50), and gender-affiliation and self-identity should not be underestimated as a contributing factor to gendered language variation (Holmes, 1998: 181). For this reason, Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz argue that

folk-linguistic discussions [...] should [...] be considered more seriously by analysts of language and gender, for they reveal dominant cultural expectations of gender-appropriate

behaviour. Gender expectations in turn underlie the actual practices in which speakers engage (2001: 8).

Janet Holmes posits that the context of the research also has an effect on respondents. The theory of accommodation surmises that people style-shift (change the way they speak) depending on who they are talking to, in order to 'accommodate' the expectations of the other party. Women, as 'co-operative' conversationalists, are more likely to over-accommodate, which could explain linguistic differences in interview situations, where most researchers are middle class (Holmes, 1998: 177). The gender of the interviewer is also relevant, as in the research context they have the agency and therefore the perceived higher status. Women facing a male interviewer experience a microcosm of the patriarchal macrocosm, creating potential feelings of powerlessness which threaten researcher-respondent rapport and create a more formal situation (Holmes, 1998: 178). There is also a risk that, concurrent with findings by Ochs and Taylor, women subconsciously seek male approval of their discourse and therefore may be more selective about what they express and how. These issues are compounded by potentially inaccurate demographic data, particularly in studies involving social class, as women's husbands' occupations are often used to indicate social background, but people do not necessarily marry within the same class group (Holmes, 1998: 176).

It is clear that assessing the difference between men and women's spoken discourse is not as simple as many a glib newspaper headline would suggest. The same data can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, or other issues can be clouded by the 'obviousness' of gender difference, and there can be problems with data accuracy. Although I have been investigating Western studies and interpretations, it is worth noting that although other cultures have different notions of gender identity and gender-appropriate language use, they do share one common feature. Deborah Cameron's analysis of cross-cultural research proves that in the majority of societies 'whatever is said to be typical of women's speech is also said to make women less well suited than men to occupy positions of power and authority' (2001: 36-37). This is control: control stems from fear, and fear shields vulnerability.

Margaret Atwood once asked a group of males what they found threatening about women. They responded, 'we're afraid that they will laugh at us' (Greer, 1999: 272). She then asked a group of females what they found threatening about men. 'We're afraid of being killed', they said (ibid.). Perhaps we could read this as a sorry state for society to be in – where over one half of it fears death at the hands of the other, whilst that half's greatest imaginable dread is a giggle. But it is also a testament to the power of language: women may pose little physical danger to male supremacy, but in their capacity to laugh at men, in the committing of an utterance, a speech act, they are terrifying. No wonder the patriarchal system has been working so hard to silence the female voice, if laughter is parallel with death. Patriarchy recognises language as power and colludes to persistently

disarm women of this weapon – for, in their mouths, it could destabilise the structure of masculine dominance.

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