

Gender Differences in the Use of Intensifiers

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Abstract

The ways men and women use language have always attracted a great deal of attention. In spite of several theories, a consistent image of gender variations in language has not been projected by the empirical enquiries yet. This study intends to examine the use of intensifiers in the speech of Iranian male and female high school and university students. To conduct the study, Lakoff's (1975) ideas about linguistic differences between males and females were taken into account. To this end, four groups of students were interviewed: female university students, female high school students, male university students and male high school students. Then 1224 sentences containing intensifiers were extracted to work on as data. For ease of analysis the intensifiers were classified into six categories which comprise five major intensifiers, i.e., *xeili*, *aslan*, *vagean*, *hatman*, *faghat*, and a miscellaneous group entitled "others". The results indicated that females used more intensifiers compared to males. This fact is even more significant in the speech of high school female students. The findings of the study confirmed Lakoff's opinion concerning gender-bound language.

Keywords: male/female speech, intensifiers, sociolinguistics, gender differences

INTRODUCTION

A plethora of research on the existence and nature of differences between men and women has been carried out in the last few decades. One of the interesting areas within the remit of sociolinguistics has been the amount of variation on the part of men and women when they use language. One reason for the popularity of this subject is the fact that language is a social phenomenon and it provides an understanding of the way men and women approach their separate social worlds. A large body of research in this area suggests that men tend to use language more for conveying information which is considered as an instrumental purpose while women tend to use language for social purposes; that is for women verbal communication is the end itself (Herring, 1993; Brownlow, Rosamon, & Parker, 2003; Colley et al., 2004).

Connection between language forms and the social roles attached to men and women who use them is one of the key issues which have attracted the attention of many sociolinguists in recent years. Baron (1986) has noted that language is used as one of the means of distinguishing gender differences in almost all societies; as such, many researchers have described women's speech as being different from the speech of men.

Lakoff (1973) believes that color words like *beige*, *lavender* and adjectives like *adorable*, *charming* are more frequently used by women than men. Wardhaugh (1993) also claims that women apply their own vocabulary for creating a particular effect; they use words like *such*, *so good*, *lovely*, *etc.* The impact of one's status on their speech style has also been investigated by researchers. Carli (1990) maintains that speech style perceptions of men and women can be result of different norms they have been entitled to. For example, low-status people, including women, which are identified as powerless speech style generally employ hesitations (well, uh), intensifiers (e.g., so, very), hedges (I think, kinda) more than men do. They resort to these linguistic devices to ensure that their social position is secure (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr, 1978). Additionally, intensifiers have been found to be frequently used by women while hedges are a feature of men's speech (Carli, 1990).

Other studies have examined gender variations through the actual words men and women use. Their findings suggest that women use more intensive adverbs, more connectors such as *but*, and more modal auxiliary verbs like *could* that place question marks over a statement (McMillan et al., 1977; Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; Mulac et al., 2001; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003). On the other hand, men have been reported to use longer words, use more articles, swear more, and use more references to location (Gleser, Gottschalk, & John, 1959; Mulac & Lundell, 1986; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003).

In spite of the existence of a rather common stereotype, another area in which findings are not consistent is emotion words. A number of studies have found that women are better at expressing emotion than do men (Mulac et al., 1990; Thomson & Murachver, 2001). However, in a study of managers who provided criticism in a role play, Mulac et al. (2000) found quite the opposite. Mehl and Pennebaker (2003) suggested reconciliation, that is women used more references to positive emotion, whereas men referred more to anger, a finding that is completely in line with gender stereotypes.

In coming up with a solid explanation for gender variation in speech form, Milroy (1997) maintains that, considering the overall direction of current sociolinguistics, a substantial explanation for linguistic variations of the two sexes is difficult. Similarly, Mulac & Bradac (1995) suggest that the intricate relationship between language, power and gender has not yet been thoroughly understood.

Trudgill's (1974) major concern was to show that community prestige norms were the main driving force in women's linguistic behavior while the same could not be said for men. He believed that women were very conservative, whereas men were leading in many situations in which change was in progress. In addition, women in his study had a tendency to over-report their use of prestige forms while men did the opposite. He came

to the conclusion that men and women react to opposed sets of norms: women respond to overt, standard language prestige norms while men respond to covert, vernacular prestige norms. Overt prestige is associated with refined qualities, and its standard language, whereas covert prestige is associated with masculine, 'rough and tough' qualities.

Not all sociolinguists agree in providing explanations of different forms employed by both genders. For instance, Lesley Milroy (1997) argues that taking various explanations of linguistic sex-marking based on prestige norms into consideration is very difficult. She asserts that women resort to language as a means of marking their status because the opportunities they could take to do so by occupation are not enough. In contrast, Trudgill (1974) maintained that women have a tendency for overt prestige because they feel powerless in society. He suggested that since society does not provide women with opportunities to show their status or power through advancing in the marketplace, they resort to their symbolic resources, including their language, to enhance their social status (Eckert, 1989).

In contrast, Rubin and Nelson (1983) provide a strong challenge to the hypothesis that language style is based on social power or male dominance. Rubin and Nelson examined the use of 'powerless' language features controlling for a variety of dimensions such as social class, ability, communication apprehension, rigidity and question type. The study involved a sample of 40 tenth grade students asked to take part in a simulated interview for a job in a fast food restaurant. From examination of linguistic features, Rubin and Nelson (1983) discovered that neither gender nor socio-economic status had a large impact on language differences. These researchers explained that when all dimensions are controlled for, the only influential variables found were ability and whether open and closed questions were used during the interview. They concluded that more open questions may allow for a better examination of language features in interaction.

In the same vein, Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr (1978) maintained that speech style is associated with social power and status. People with low status in society tend to use a powerless speech style accompanied with hesitations ("uh," "well"), hedges ("I think," "kinda"), intensifiers ("so," "very"), question forms (use of rising, question intonation in declarative form), polite forms, and gestures. On the other hand, High-status people seldom employ these powerless forms and use what Erickson et al. called the "powerful style".

Apart from all universal differences between men and women speech, this difference in the case of Iranian women seem more significant due to the limitations and inhibitions that women in our country encounter. In addition to this possibly universal fact that society does not allow women to show their power or position in the market, and they resort to their language for a higher status, Iranian women are faced with another social limitation, that is the dress code they have to follow which might put them in a more limited and inferior position and might deprive them of the chance to establish their social status.

Furthermore, until recently the majority of men in Iran used to consider women as second rate citizens. It seems, therefore, that the only symbolic resource available to Iranian women to display their social status is their language. Some of the privileges that men could have enjoyed, women could not, one of which is freedom of the style of speaking with which they feel more comfortable.

Consequently, we intend to launch a study to investigate the use of intensifiers in the speech of Iranian male and female students. However, we will first introduce a brief description of intensifiers.

Intensifiers

Wikipedia defines intensifiers as a “linguistic term that makes no contribution to the propositional meaning of a clause but serves to enhance and give additional emotional context to the word it modifies”. Intensifiers increase the effect of a verb by using an adverb that strengthens the emotional content of the word. Intensifiers are used to delicately suggest to the audience how they should feel. Adverbs could also be used to reduce the emotional content of a verb. Some examples of intensifiers are:

- *That is very interesting.* (basic intensifier)
- *That is very, very interesting.* (repetition to increase effect)
- *That is extremely interesting.* (suggests extreme response)
- *That is amazingly interesting.* (suggests being amazed)
- *That is scarily interesting.* (suggests being scared)
- *That is quite interesting.* (reducing intensity)
- *That is a bit interesting.* (reducing intensity)

The basic intensifier is 'very' and can be used with many verbs. Other intensifiers often have the quite the same meaning as 'very' but have other forms. A few examples of intensifiers are: *very, extremely, really, fantastically, remarkably*, etc.

Intensifiers usually imply to the audience how they should feel. When the audience hears the emotion named in the adverb, he/she automatically begins to feel that way. Since adverbs are not the part of a sentence which would require too much noticing, the audience does not realize the suggestions consciously (Stock, 2010).

An interesting pattern of intensification could also be employed. In this pattern negative words are utilized to intensify the effect of positive verbs. For example words like *terribly, insanely, awfully, dreadfully, fearfully*:

- *She is dreadfully beautiful.*
- *What an insanely good idea!*

Since many strong emotions are negative, using them in a positive context would transfer that intensity of emotion to the positive words. It also adds to the emotional effect of the word by combining negative and positive words (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

METHOD

Participants

To carry out the investigation semi-structured interviews were conducted with four groups of students:

- female university students
- female high school students
- male university students
- male high school students

Four participants were interviewed from each group which came to a total number of 16. It should be noted that in some of the interviews, two participants were interviewed simultaneously. All the participants were living in the sixth district of Tehran. High school students were all going to the schools located in this district; as for university students, they were attending different universities throughout Tehran. Almost all the participants belonged to the same socioeconomic status, i.e. middle class.

Context of the Interviews

To have a clear and comprehensive picture of the environment in which participants lived, statistical information was obtained from the district's municipality located in Yusef Abad Street. Here is a summary of the official data gathered about the sixth district of Tehran:

The district which has been chosen for the purpose of this study has its own unique characteristics just like any other district. It is located in the center of the capital neighboring with six other districts. It is a densely packed district with a multitude of private and state organizations including ten ministries, some colleges, hospitals, hotels, sports centers, parks and embassies. Another unique feature of this district is the presence of six churches which indicates that the number of non-Muslims is high in that area. In fact this district is populated by a large group of Armenians and Christians. For detailed information about the district refer to the following table:

Table 1. Information about the sixth district of Tehran

Population	220,000
Area	21.2 square km
Neighborhood	18
Park	30
Church	6
Ministry	10
Theater	8
Embassy	21
Museum	8
Library	3
Mosque	22
House of Culture	2

Cinema	13
Gallery	13
College	10

Procedure

To collect the relevant data, 16 participants were randomly selected and interviewed. Before the interviews, they were asked if the interviews could be recorded and fortunately all agreed. The interviewers did their best to conduct real and naturalistic interviews to eliminate the effect of formality of interview. Each interview lasted for about 45 minutes. While the interviews were transcribed, the sentences containing the intensifiers were extracted to work on as data. Finally, 1224 sentences containing intensifiers were extracted.

For the ease of analysis the intensifiers were classified into six categories which comprise five major intensifiers, i.e., *xeili* (very, much), *aslan* (never, not), *vaghean* (really), *hatman* (certainly), *faghat* (only), and a miscellaneous group entitled "others". Then the frequency of occurrence of each intensifier was calculated in the speech of each participant.

Data Analysis

The data were coded for the type of intensifier used by participants and gender as a social factor. Afterwards, they were analyzed using the SPSS software. Frequency counts were used to show the frequency of 'intensifiers' as found in the Persian utterances produced by males and females. Also, the researchers used percentage figures to show the distribution of each linguistic item within and between groups.

RESULTS

Results of analysis of data will be presented in two main parts. In the first part, the overall distribution of intensifiers is discussed. As can be seen, table 1 represents the overall distribution of the six categories of the intensifiers in our sample.

Table 2. The distribution of the intensifiers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
xeili(very, much)	412	33.7	33.7	33.7
aslan(never, not)	155	12.7	12.7	46.6
hatman(certainly)	110	9.0	9.0	55.3
vaghean(really)	247	20.2	20.2	75.5
faghat(only)	76	6.2	6.2	81.7
others	224	18.3	18.3	100.0
total	1224	100.0	100.0	

As shown, among the several intensifiers in Persian language, 'xeili' (meaning very) is used more than the others (33.7%). 'vaghean' (really) is the next most frequently used intensifier with 12.7 percentage of use, and 'faghat' (only) has the least frequency

among all tokens of intensifiers; that is only 6.2 percent of the intensifiers used by both males and females belonged to faghat.

In the second part of our analysis we will see how women and men behave in this respect. Their differences are shown in figure 1.

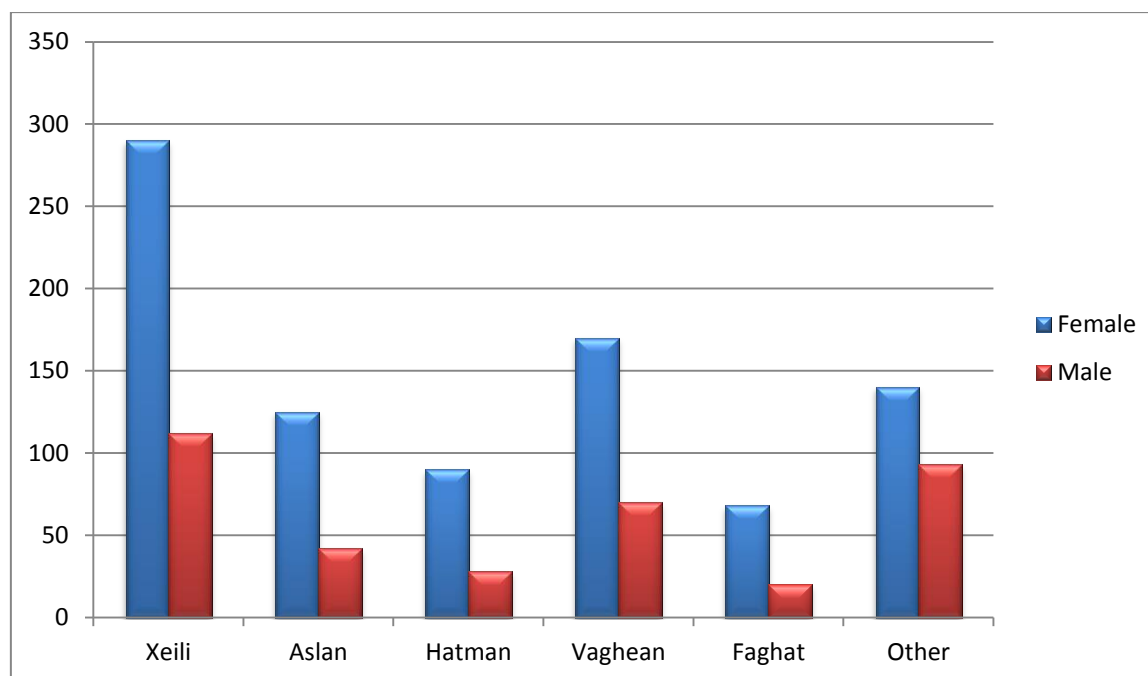


Figure 1. The frequency of occurrence of intensifiers in the speech of male and female students

As shown some intensifiers like 'xeili' and 'vaghean' are utilized by women much more than men, perhaps to indicate their certainty or control over the situation. The data presented in figure 1 show a significant difference between intensifier usages in Persian male/female speech. As it is obvious in this chart, in all categories females overused the intensifiers. "Xeili" is the most frequent intensifier employed by the two groups, while "faghat" was proved to be the least frequent one.

Table 3. The frequency and the percentage of the intensifiers employed by male and female students

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	892	72.9	72.9	72.9
Male	322	27.1	27.1	100.0
Total	1224	100.0	100.0	

Frequency counts, however, indicate that out of 1224 sentences containing intensifiers extracted from our interviews 892 sentences (72.9 %) were used by females while only 332 sentences (27.1 %) were found in the speech of male participants. In other words, women utilized intensifiers about twice as much as men, which is a highly significant figure.

Considering the possible effects of our second variable i.e. the educational background of the subjects on the use of intensifier, based on figure 2 we came to this conclusion that this variable did not have a significant influence.

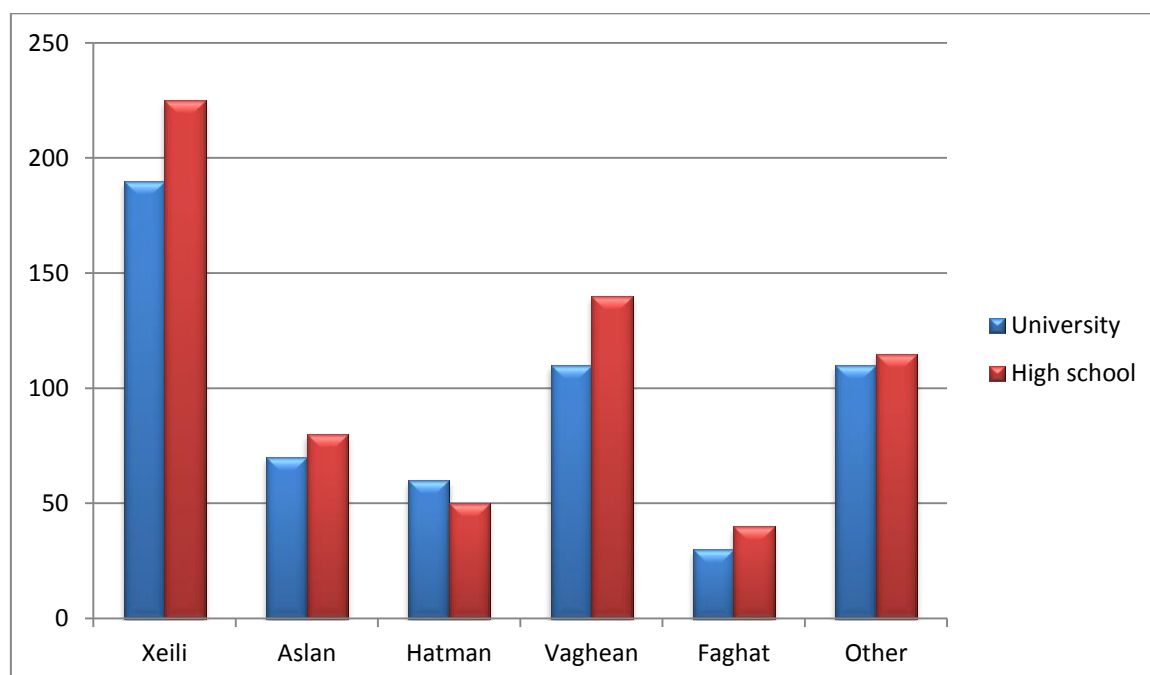


Figure 2. The distribution of the intensifiers according to educational background of the subjects

But it is worthwhile to mention that the frequencies of occurrence of intensifiers in all categories were higher in the speech of high school students except “hatman”. This intensifier was more popular among university students. Surprisingly our miscellaneous category which we entitled as “others” yielded the same number of intensifiers in both groups. Table 3 statistically confirms our findings by giving the percentage of the intensifiers in two educational groups.

Table 4. The percentage of the intensifiers in two educational groups

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
University	581	47.5	47.5	47.5
High school	643	52.5	52.5	100.0
Total	1224	100.0	100.0	

In sum, the results of this study indicate that as it was expected females employed more intensifiers in their utterances compared to males. This fact is even more significant in the speech of high school female students.

DISCUSSION

Lakoff (1973) has noted that women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not able to hold it, as demonstrated by linguistic and other aspects of their behavior. The problem for her is, therefore not a linguistic but a cultural one and the distinction between male/female language seems to be a symptom of a

problem in our culture. It is also claimed that in societies in which the roles of men and women are most clearly differentiated, the greatest linguistic differences may appear (Wardhaugh, 1993).

Traditionally, Iranian women have been denied access to power at least in the last century and except for a few cases (some parliamentary positions and a couple of cabinet memberships), they have never had access to political power. Between 1973 and 1980, for instance, only 13.6% of the university faculty members were women and this percentage has increased by only 6% since then. In addition, the establishment of a new system in 1979 and the social changes that followed have presumably put Iranian women in a more inferior social status, making them express their social position neither by their earning power (a universal problem (Trudgill, 1974)), nor by how they appear in public, because of the Islamic dress code. Therefore, we had predicted that linguistic devices should be among the only means immediately available to Iranian women to express their social status. The results of this study confirmed our prediction and Lakoff's observation of women's talk. It seems that Iranian women participated in the interviews feel that their social status is not secure enough, and they therefore, appeal to linguistic means to signal it.

As for a linguistic preference in the speech of university and high school students, no significant difference was observed. In fact, high school students' use of intensifiers was only slightly more than the university students. This might suggest that since their teens both girls and boys start to learn the social roles they are expected to fulfill in the society and the linguistic devices necessary for signaling those roles.

However when it comes to generalizing the findings of the study, it is very difficult to decide, since limitations the researcher had when conducting the study would prevent us from generalizing the results to every communication environment in the society.

CONCLUSION

By using "men as the norm and women as a deviation" criteria, many researchers have explained their results in order to prove how women's language use is inferior to or different from men's (Lakoff, 1973; Cameron, 1992). In this study a highly significant difference was observed in the utterances of the participants in favor of females. This fact was even more noticeable in the speech of high-school female students.

In addition to this worldwide issue that society does not allow women to enhance their power or status through action in the marketplace, and they are thrown upon their language to enhance their social position, Iranian women are confronted with another social restriction, namely some kind of dress code which apparently puts them in a more inferior social status and deprives them of using their appearance to establish their social status. It seems, therefore, that the only symbolic resource available to Iranian women to display their social status is their language. Consequently, as low-status persons they should appeal to linguistic devices such as intensifiers to secure and signal their position in society.

Due to some limitation of this study it would be very difficult to generalize the findings of this study to the population. Firstly, some of the interviewees, especially among male participants, were more reticent than others and it was rather difficult to get them engaged in the process of interviews. Secondly, as mentioned before, in a few interviews two subjects were participating simultaneously. Although this technique was very effective in gathering the data in a more naturalistic situation, in some cases it was a little bit detrimental since when one participant was answering a question the other one was just listening and just expressed his/her "agreement". Therefore it resulted in a "cut-back" effect on the number of intensifiers.

Another drawback of the study is related to the length of interviews. Some of the interviews lasted longer because the participants showed greater eagerness to talk more about the certain topics that had been chosen for the purpose of the study. To modify the influence of this problem we decided to transcribe almost equal portion of interviews and as a result a few topics was dropped from them which might have lent themselves more to the utilization of intensifiers.

The findings of this study have important implications for understanding the power of society on forming the identities of both genders which might lead to different language choices by men and women. The findings also facilitate self-awareness of both males and females when using various language forms to communicate their meaning. The issues raised in this study provide a basis for future research. For example, the sample in this study was limited to one district in Tehran. Future research might apply a similar methodology to a wider sample to determine whether gender differences are significant at that level too.

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