

Approaches to Gender Studies: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

Gender creeps into our day-to-day life so smoothly that we take it for granted and accept it as a natural part of our lives, something that needs no explanation. The development of gender roles often begins as early as infancy. It manifests itself in all aspects of our social life. The traces of gender can be found in our way of speaking, the use of humour, conflict situations and so on. It is embedded so strongly in our actions, beliefs and desires that it appears to us quite natural. In general, gender is among those variables that need to be taken into account in order to explain the patterns of language usage. The current study is an attempt to, in the first place, have a review of prominent sociolinguistic approaches to gender (dominance vs. difference approach). It further, delves into the relationship between gender and language via brief review of the studies carried out in the past three decades. The study provides some critical viewpoints of these approaches.

Keywords: gender, language, speaking style, dominance paradigm, difference paradigm

INTRODUCTION

Gender is the most important lens through which we view people and life. It is often difficult to understand exactly what is meant by the term 'gender', and in what sense it differs from the closely related term 'sex'. While sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that are defined for men and women, gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society constructs for men and women and which are considered appropriate for them (World Health Organization). In other words, sex is a fixed concept which does not change across societies while gender is in a state of flux and varies from one society to another.

About half a century after Simon de-Beauvoir's (1952, p. 267) well-known statement "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman", Deborah Cameron (1995, p. 43) argues that "One is never finished becoming a woman or a man." In a similar vein, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003, p. 30) opine that "As we age, we continue to learn new ways of being men and women." Goffman (1977, p. 316) opines that even walking into a public toilet does gender,

“... toilet segregation is presented as a natural consequence of the difference between the sex-classes when in fact it is a means of honouring, if not producing, this difference.”

Gender gains its existence in relation to such social categories as language, which is considered as a fruitful resource for gender manifestation. The assumption that gender affects discourse has been investigated widely by scholars (Holmes, 1986; Lakoff, 2004; Tannen, 1990). Coates (1993, p. 166) believes that “Learning to be male-female means among other things is learning to use gender- appropriate language”. Men and women adopt different linguistic behaviours in speech situations. These different ways of speaking account for the differences between men and women. As we talk, we use linguistic resources to present ourselves as a particular kind of person. Language helps us to project on other’s attitude or stance, to change the flow of talk and to affect our interlocutor. Hence any aspect of language, i.e. tone and pitch of voice, intonation patterns, choice of vocabulary, pronunciation and even grammatical patterns can signal gendered aspects of the speaker’s self- presentation.).

DO MEN AND WOMEN SPEAK DIFFERENTLY?

The folk linguistic assumptions such as; women are more talkative than men (chattering women)¹, or men interrupt women more, have been among the controversial topics in gender studies .The so-called stereotypes about how women and men use language have been challenged via focusing on different facets of language, for example from different syntactical, phonological and lexical uses of language (Trudgill 1998) to aspects of conversation analysis such as topic control, interruption(West and Zimmerman, 1983), minimal responses, tag question and hedges (Coates, 1993; Hillier, 2004; Maltz and Broker, 1982) and other interactional features.

To answer the question of ‘what factors contribute to the differences in men’s and women’s discourse’, some researchers suggest that the differences are biological in nature (Bishopand Wahlsten, 1997; Baron-Cohen et al., 2005). The validity of the biological accounts of gender differences in linguistic behaviour as they are not verified by scientific evidence can be considered as the “Achilles’ heel” of this approach. The most recent research on men/women brain size in Spain shows that men’s brain is 11% bigger than women’s (News, 2012). However, there is no evidence to show that there is a relationship between brain size and men/women’s linguistic behaviour. Others attribute the difference in men-women linguistic behaviour to nurture, i.e., the effect of such environmental factors as education,

¹ Mehl et.al (2007) in their study entitled *Are Women Really More Talkative than Men* challenged neuropsychiatrist Brizendine report that “A woman uses about 20,000 words per day while a man uses about 7,000” by calling it a cultural myth. Mehl and her assistances recorded natural language of 396 participants over 8 years.

society and culture (e.g. Lakoff, 2004; Cameron, 2007) and still others (e.g. Tannen, 1990) are convinced that differences are a matter of free choice, a tendency to prefer certain form where variation exists, selecting one speech style rather than the other. Taking into account the third approach, the researcher aligns with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) who argue that although gender performances are available to everyone, with them comes constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity. Apparently, we are not free in our choice and depending on when, where and under what circumstances an interaction is taking place, we are forced to choose specific speech styles, so the preference of one style to another might be a void reason for the difference between men's and women's discourse.

The studies on the differences between men's and women's speech style cover a wide range of areas in different languages, particularly in English.

The publication of two influential books, Thorne and Henley's *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance* (1975) and Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (1981) shifted the focus away from Lakoff's (1975) proposed features of women's language as the markers of females' uncertainty. They suggest that these features should be read in a different way when looked at in the context of real, mixed-sex interaction. In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen (1990) introduces a new trend of thinking which leads to a paradigm shift in gender studies, as the powerful/powerless taxonomy is substituted by the competitive/co-operative dichotomy.

LAKOFF'S CONTRIBUTION TO GENDER STUDIES

Robin Lakoff's 1975 article 'Language and Women's Place' had sparked off interest in studies on language and gender in disciplines such as anthropology, communication studies, education, psychology and sociology for over three decades. Her pioneering work argues that women have different ways of speaking from men which reflects their subordinate position in society. In her article she suggests that women's speech typically displays a range of features such as (Lakoff 2004, p. 48, 79-81):

1. Hedges of various types e.g., "well", "y'know", "kinda" and so on.
2. Super polite forms: Women are the experts at using euphemism; they are the repositories of tact. They do not use off-colour or indelicate expression.
3. Tag questions as the statement expressing uncertainty.
4. Question intonation in declarative statements (raising the pitch of voice at the end).
5. Speaking in italics; intonational emphasis equal to underlining words.
6. Empty adjectives such as divine, charming, adorable.
7. Hyper-corrected grammar and pronunciation (English class grammar).
8. Lack of sense of humour: women do not tell jokes well and often do not understand the punch-line of jokes.
9. The use of intensive 'so'.

10. Special lexicon: women use more words for things like colours, shopping, while men for sports, car.

Lakoff believes that using these devices makes women's language unpleasant. She goes on to posit that this kind of language renders women's speech tentative, powerless and trivial which disqualifies women from positions of power and authority. In this way language becomes a tool of oppression. Her proposal was based on two preconceptions: 1) women and men talk differently and 2) differences in women's and men's speech are the result of – and the support of- male dominance. Lakoff's claim that women tend to use more question forms than men which make them seem less assertive was challenged in Fishman's (1983) research in mixed –sex conversations where it was proven that the women asked more questions because they were often responsible for getting their male partners to open up and chat to them. So “asking questions is not signalling uncertainty and powerlessness but as part of conversational labour women are required to perform in their social role” (Goddard and Meanpatterson 2000, p. 99).

Lakoff's description of female speech style was sharply criticized for it was based on “introspective methods” (Lakoff 2004, p. 40) where she used her personal intuitions in analyzing collected data rather than providing a systematic quantitative observation. Her exploration of women's language was critically challenged by O'Barr and Atkins (1980). In their article 'Women's language or Powerless' they describe the results of their 30 months courtroom studies. Examining the witnesses' testimony for the ten basic speech features proposed by Lakoff as women's language, they argue that the differences that Lakoff and others have suggested are not necessarily the result of being a woman. In other words, the quoted speech patterns are not the characteristics of all women's speech neither are they limited to women speakers. O'Barr and Atkins further argue that these features constitute the speech of powerless speakers.

JENNIFER COAT AND HILLIER'S PERSPECTIVE OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER AND LANGUAGE

Some years later, Jennifer Coates (1986, 1996, 1998) carried out an in-depth examination of conversations in single-sex female groups to investigate how far and in what circumstances women make use of features of so-called 'women's language'. After analyzing a corpus of 20 recordings of naturally occurring conversations between women friends, Coates referred to 'story telling', 'hedging', 'questioning', 'repetition' and 'establishing collaborative floor' as the linguistic strategies women use in talk with friends to establish and maintain close and equal social relationships as well as to minimize social distance. She argues that the use of hedges by women is not the evidence of their unassertiveness or weakness but it demonstrates the strength of women's conversational and personal skills. She furthermore believes that hedges can be deployed for a range of positive functions:

1. They can express shades of doubt/confidence.
2. They allow us to be sensitive to other's feelings.

3. They help us in the search for the right words to express what we mean.
4. They allow us to avoid playing the expert status.

These positive functions of hedges (Coates, 1993) are among the functions discourse markers have in spoken interaction. Adopting the Systemic-Functional model as an analytical framework, Hillier (2004) compared an extract from a telephone conversation with one from a face-to-face conversation between two female speakers. The three features of 'hedges', 'minimal responses' and 'hesitations' in terms of both frequency and patterns of occurrence are explored. At the end of her study, she concludes that "The phone data shows greater use of all three phenomena than the face data" (Hillier 2004, p. 88). It means that women use a higher proportion of each feature in the phone than the face-to-face conversation which can be attributed to the differences in the mode of communication. Hillier's findings validate many of the claims made by Coates about the ways in which women friends can "work towards achieving rewarding conversational goals" (p. 91). Although Hillier's investigation throw an interesting light on aspects of talk between women friends, due to the limitation of the scope of her study the results are not applicable to other contexts or participants, for example women in working/social situations or the interactions in cross-sex groups.

DIFFERENCE VS. DOMINANCE PARADIGM

Over the past years, the studies on gender and communication could be categorized under two frameworks:

1. Gender as cross-cultural difference
2. Gender as social power/dominance

Difference Paradigm

The advocates of the difference/cross-culture approach believe that women and men speak differently because of fundamental differences in their relation to language, perhaps due to different socialization and early (childhood) experience (Tannen, 1990). Adopting Gumperz's (1982) cross-cultural perspective, the proponents of the difference model locate the cross-sex miscommunication in early sex-segregated behaviours in which boys and girls learn "genderlect" (Maltz and Broker, 1982) which is carried into adulthood and is the main reason for miscommunication between two gender groups. For the proponents of cross-gender model the difference in male-female language usage is so broad that they see it as a cross-cultural difference. Having a sociolinguistic perspective towards the differences between men's/women's speech styles, the difference approach places emphasis on the idea that women and men belong to two different sub-cultures.

For Deborah Tannen, a well-known advocate of this approach, men and women's linguistic behaviour are so different that she calls cross-gender communication as cross-cultural. In her book *You just Don't Understand* (1990) she posits that the main reason for the difference between men-women's speech is that men and women try

to accomplish different things with talk. Men approach conversation as a contest. Thus, they prefer to lead a conversation in a direction in which they can take central role by for example telling a joke, displaying information or skill, which Tannen calls "report talk" (public speaking). While most women's conversation is a way of establishing community and creating connection, which she calls "rapport talk" (private speaking) (Tannen, 1990, p. 74-95). She believes that men approach the world as a place to achieve and maintain status while women approach it as a network of connections to seek support and consensus. Tannen is not only concerned about how people communicate and interpret in conversation, but also identifies a number of stylistic strategies they use to create rapport/intimacy. Topic choice, pacing, narrative strategies and expressive paralinguistic features such as pitch and voice quality are among the identified features suggested by Tannen who believes that the use of these features characterize a "high involvement style" (1984, p.31). She sees the style differences in conversational behaviour as the indication of equal but different modes of behaving. The various ways women make use of conversation in order to establish intimacy with others, confuses men. One of these ways is what Tannen (1990, p. 53) calls "troubles talk." She states that for women, talking about troubles is the essence of connection. I tell you my troubles, you tell me your troubles, and we are close. Men, however, hear trouble talk as a request for advice, so they respond with a solution. When a man offers this kind of information the woman often feels as if he is trying to diminish her problem or cut her off (p. 49-53). According to Tannen (1990, p. 32-33) the miscommunication between men-women occurs when "a meta message" (individual's interpretation of how a communication is meant) is read by a receiver through his/her communication filter and not through that of the sender. She indicates that 'male as norm' view point is what has led many people to believe in the existence of the 'other' kind of language for women as opposed to two separate styles. Furthermore, she makes the point that both sexes need to understand the inherent differences in their communication styles which is the main reason for the miscommunication between them. She goes on by suggesting that if men and women have an understanding of the other's ways of talking, they are able to communicate more effectively. Tannen concludes her book by alluding to Neal Armstrong (the first man on the moon) that: "Learning the other's ways of talking is a leap across the communication gap between men and women, and a giant step towards genuine understanding (1990, p. 298)".

Tannen's style of writing has been criticized for being very impersonal and casual which is incompatible with scientific literature. She conveys her information by mixing examples from her own life with other examples from the real world. Aki Uchida's study entitled 'When difference is dominance' (1992) was among those critical responses to Tannen's book. He critiques the stance taken by the 'difference paradigm' for two main reasons: (ibid, p. 547)

1. This approach is too simple to account for the things that happen in mixed-sex conversations.

2. The dichotomization of 'power' and 'culture' as two separate, independent concepts is improper (he believes that social interactions always occur in the context of a particular society).

Tannen's informal anecdotal style of writing is both informative and entertaining, however, it does not provide the reader with a specific framework she utilized for analyzing her data. Her analysis of the conversations relies mainly on her personal intuition rather than the use of a precise and comprehensive scientific framework. Furthermore, the experimental evidence she collected for her book belongs to American women entirely. Thus, whether the results are applicable to other societies/cultures is unclear.

In a somewhat similar vein, American anthropologists Maltz and Broker (1982) in support of their stand with regard to a two-culture model, (difference approach) argue that the main reason for the miscommunication in male-female interactions is that they learn and use 'genderlect' i.e., two separate sets of rules for engaging and interpreting conversation. They refer to a number of areas in which men and women use different conversational rules. The interpretation of 'minimal responses' is one of these areas. According to their findings (1982, p. 421) minimal responses, such as 'yes', 'yeah', 'mmhmm' have different meanings for men and women which lead to occasionally serious miscommunications. To women, minimal responses mean something like 'I'm listening to you; please continue', while men attach much stronger meaning to them, such as 'I agree with you', 'I follow your argument so far'. They believe that these norms were acquired in childhood single- sex peer group interactions (e.g., through segregated educational system) rather than mixed -sex groups and the issue is therefore one of (sub-) culture miscommunication rather than social inequality.

Imagine a male speaker who is receiving repeated nods or 'mm hmm's from the woman he is speaking to. She is merely indicating that she is listening, but he thinks she is agreeing with everything he says. Now imagine a female speaker who is receiving only occasional nods and 'mm hmm's from the man she is speaking to. He is indicating that she doesn't always agree; she thinks he isn't always listening. (Maltz and Broker, 1982, p. 422)

Analyzing naturally occurring stories told by women and men in the New Zealand conversations, Janet Holmes (1993) explored the ways New Zealand women and men use stories in their daily interactions to construct gendered identities. At the end of her study, she concluded that men and women do gender by telling stories but in different ways. Women tell stories as a way of keeping in touch with friends while in men's stories 'doing gender' involves presenting themselves as being knowledgeable and competent or, if things go wrong, as having self-awareness, being sophisticated and reflective.

Dominance Paradigm

The dominance model, a feminist oriented perspective, stresses that differences between men's and women's speech style arise because of the male's dominance over women which persists in order to keep women subordinated to men. Associated with this paradigm are scholars such as Dale Spender (1981), Deborah Cameron (2003, 2006), and Pamela Fishman (1980, 1983), to name a few. Through the social inequality and patriarchy lenses, the proponents of dominance paradigm voiced their objection to cross-gender model of the difference camp. In a speech delivered at Leeds University entitled 'Men are from Earth, Women are from Earth' Deborah Cameron (2003, p. 145) while addressing John Gray's book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992) clearly articulated the underlying premise for much of her work. She opines that "any difference in men's and women's way of communication is not natural and inevitable but cultural and political". In her latest article (2010) Cameron argues that in mixed-sex conversations, women try to "disarm potential threats by displaying a submissive or non-provocative attitude while with other women it is rational to try to form protective alliances by displaying solidarity and mutual regard. Men are 'less polite' not because they cannot use these strategies, but because in most situations they feel no need to" (p. 185). She criticizes the 'difference theorists' for seeing childhood socialization as the most important gender constructing process. She (2006) believes that all versions of the myths regarding men's/women's different speech style share some or all of the following premises:

1. Women are more verbally skilled than men.
2. Language and communication matter more to women than to men.
3. Men's goal in using language is to get things done while women's is making connections with other people.
4. Men's way of using language is competitive while women's is cooperative.

While the advocates of the 'difference paradigm' argue that women as a sub-cultural group have different but preferred conversational strategies, the 'dominance theorists' point out that some groups are heavily disadvantaged by their conversational styles, i.e. the conversational styles of some groups have unfavourable material consequences for their members (see e.g., Fishman, 1980). Thus, speakers who employ a less assertive style of speech are less likely to get floor, to be heard seriously and to be able to control the conversation flow.

The main concern of the difference/dominance paradigm is to focus on the men-women speech from a sociolinguistic perspective and to look for the sociological causes of the difference/similarity between their linguistic behaviour. Thus, reviewing the scholarly studies that carried out on male-female discourse contributes to the better understanding of the nature of the existing differences/similarities. It could, further, help to make a connection between the use of DMs and the sociological facets of interaction by focusing on those interpersonal

needs the interlocutors have in fulfilling their social roles endowed to them by the society from which they come from.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Gender is the most important lens through which we view people and life. This study has outlined findings of previous studies on gender and language, a pervasive topic since 1970s. The current study was an attempt to challenge such stereotypes as women are talkative, they gossip more, they are super polite, they are being interrupted more and they are mainly looking for intimacy and establishing friendship while men speak more comfortable in public and use more curse and rough language. In other words, women speak a language of connection and intimacy while men speak a language of status and independence. To the author, culture is a significant factor in allowing women/ men to express themselves. For instance, certain ethnic backgrounds allow “private/ public” talk for a specific gender group or in some cultures ‘overlap’ is a token of engagement and interest while it is considered rude and impolite in others. The next time we ask the question of whether men and women have different conversational styles, we need to take into account the context of cross-cultural communication.

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