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Towards an interdisciplinary perspective on gender differences in the English language

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between language and gender has always been an interesting topic which has been under discussion over the last few centuries. Throughout the history of language study, lots of studies have been conducted and different linguists have been looking at this issue from different angles. As a socially constructed notion of what is feminine and what is masculine, gender is considered to be closely interrelated to different aspects of our life, especially to our language. From interdisciplinary perspectives in analyzing the corpus taken from the language used in daily communication, the study pointed out various differences between genders both in language forms depicting genders and in language use among genders as well. Although there are some changes in the language used about each sex as well as the ways each sex uses the language, there is still the belief that sexism in the English language does exist in English-speaking society. Concerning the contributions, an awareness of these differences can help both language teachers and learners understand a great deal of English speaking cultures, thus making it easy for language them to understand or use the language in the most appropriate way.

Key words: *communication style, differences, English language, gender, sexism*

1. Introduction

According to Hall (1997), there is a strong relationship between the concepts of language, identity, and cultural differences. While culture is concerned about ‘sharing meaning’, language is a link that is used to ‘make sense’ of things, and meaning can be

exchanged and produced. He also mentioned that language is essential to culture and meaning and can be considered the key container of the values and meanings of culture.

As language reflects culture and is shaped by it, once we learn a language, we will have a great deal of knowledge about how the culture defines the two genders with that language. The problem is that this knowledge must be discovered because "*language itself is taken for granted*" (Lindsey, 1997, p.74). The phenomenon of linguistic gender differences is common to any language in the world.

As language constantly focuses on genders, learning to be males or females in a society means, among other things, "*learning to use the appropriate language*" of that society (Bacon, 1997, p.166). Based on this conception, the study of gender differences in the English language is considered to be beneficial in various aspects: It not only helps one understand a great deal of English-speaking culture, the roles of males and females in that society but also changes their attitudes towards the nature of the language and its effects on English-speaking societies.

In the scope of this study, the author makes investigation into gender differences in the English language. From the research findings, he provides explanations for and suggests attitudes towards these differences from the point of view of a speaker of the language.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Sex and gender

The term *sex* and *gender* now have much confusion associated with their usage. *Sex* refers to "*biological distinctions between males and females*", while *gender* refers to "*what a society considers to be proper behaviors and attitudes for males and females*" (Nydon, 1997, p.191). What a given society defines as masculine or feminine is a component of *gender*. Certainly, the definition of *sex* is less likely to be altered than that of *gender*; whereas, "*gender itself is learned, is not immutable, has changed over times and varies considerably in different culture*" (Lindsey, 1997, p.3).

2.2. Relationship between language, identity and cultural differences

A language is "*a system of symbols governed by rules and patterns common to a community of people*" (Ivy & Backlund, 2000, p.171). As an important aspect of human in their life, language is used to communicate with others (Wardhaugh, 2002, p.29). Concerning the relationship between language, identity and cultural differences, some different interpretations can be formed that are based on social practices. The relationship between language and culture is a complex one due largely to the great difficulty in understanding people's cognitive processes when they communicate.

Whorf (1956, as cited in Ji et al., 2004) believed that linguistic patterns (such as grammars) in different languages have impact on people's habitual thinking. In his view, the differences in linguistic structures between languages are reflected in habitual

thoughts and habitual behaviors. He also believed that culture and language are not separable (1956, as cited in Ji et al., 2004). The structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world. Edward Sapir recognized the close relationship between language and culture, concluding that it was not possible to understand or appreciate one without knowledge of the other (taken from Wardhaugh, 2002, p.220). Wardhaugh (2002, pp.119-220) reported that there appear to be three claims to the relationship between language and culture: (i) *The structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world;* (ii) *The culture of a people finds reflections in the language they employ;* (iii) *A “neutral claim” which claims that there is little or no relationship between the two.*

Hall (1997) defines the important concepts of language, identity, and cultural differences and addresses the complicated interrelationship between them and the differences that may affect these three aspects interchangeably. Hall (1997) argues that language, identity, and cultural differences are strongly connected due to the strong relationship between representation and culture. He mentions that culture, as a group of shared meanings, is presented through language, which is a tool that works as a representational system. In this system, symbols and signs whether words, sounds, images, etc. can be used by people to stand and present concepts, feelings, and ideas to others. Hall (1997) considers language one of the ‘media’ that present thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a culture. As a vehicle of thoughts, “*language can affect how you think, shaping your reality and allow you to verbally communicate what you think and feel, to convey who you are to others*” (Ivy & Backlund, 2000, p.172). When it comes to functions, language can be considered as a reflection of gender differences in society.

It can be clearly seen that there is a strong relationship between the three concepts of language, identity, and cultural differences. Although there are different viewpoints, most of the authors agree on the idea that the structure of the language can reflect or determine how people see or think about the world. This idea theoretically sets a foundation stone for the author to make investigation into gender differences in the English language.

2.3. Communication styles

According to Wofford, Gerloff and Cummins (1977) communication style is defined as a “specialized set of interpersonal behaviors with related purposes and similar approaches used consistently by a person in similar situations”.

Other definition by Norton (1983) defines communication style as “the way one verbally, nonverbally, and para-verbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood”. Based on his review of interpersonal theory focusing on communication behavior, Norton (1978) established a communicator style construct. The results from his thesis revealed attentive and friendly style components at the one end of the dimension and dominant and contentious style components at the other end.

A similar approach is given by Richmond and McCroskey (1990) who developed the Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure. Assertiveness reflects a person's willingness to speak up for her- or himself taking control, and influencing others in interaction, while responsiveness involves being other-oriented, considering others' feelings, and listening to what others say.

De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, et al. (2009, p.179) defined communication style as "the characteristic way a person sends verbal, para-verbal, and non-verbal signals in social interactions denoting (a) who he or she is or wants to (appear to) be, (b) how he or she tends to relate to people with whom he or she interacts, and (c) in what way his or her messages should usually be interpreted". He developed the communication styles inventory from a lexical study that operationalized six communication styles: expressiveness, preciseness, questioningness, impression manipulativeness, emotionality and verbal aggressiveness.

With regard to various perceptions, most of the authors share the view that communication styles can reflect personal identities and also interactional aspects of the interlocutors.

3. Methodology

To find out and analyze gender differences in the English language from *interdisciplinary perspectives*, the study makes use of two main methods in linguistic studies: (i) *descriptive analysis* and (ii) *document analysis* with the corpus being the language used in daily communication.

Descriptive analysis is implemented through the use of verbal descriptions of linguistics features to depict genders or the language used among genders together with their explanations from cultural and social perspectives. Based on descriptions about the literature review and the actual use of the language, conclusions about gender differences in the English language will be drawn.

Document analysis is implemented through the review and analysis of the notions of gender, language, language components and their socio-cultural values for notable conclusions drawn out at the end of the study. The data collected are, therefore, almost qualitative.

4. Findings

4.1. Gender differences in the English language

The relationship between language and gender concerns the different ways in which males and females use the language and how the structures of the language reflect and promote gender divisions in a society. In English, males are linguistically different from females in a variety of ways (Bacon, 1997, p.143). These differences concern not only

the language use, in particular, the differing usage of women and men as speakers but also in aspects of the language used to talk about each sex (Bacon, 1997, p.3).

4.1.1. Gender differences in language forms depicting genders

It should be surprising to find differential attitudes and feelings about males and females in the English language. In addition to the common language used about males and females, English contains a large variety of sexist words. Culturally speaking, English words that refer to females often have negative connotations. Analysis reveals persistent negative bias against females. They take, for example, various forms of gender debasement. The female terms have been debased into those that have occurred in female gendered words with sexual connotations (Grawford & Unger, 2000, p.61). Even terms of endearment addressed to females have also undergone some debasement. *Dolly* and *Tootsie*, for example begin as pet names but eventually acquire the meaning of mistress or prostitute.

Socially, the English language has a tendency to define women as a sort of male appendage. A woman's linguistic existence is, in many cases, expressed in essentially male terms and from a male point of view. or with male interests in mind (Henberg, 1990, p.333). One example of this tendency is the fact that many of the nouns that refer to women are linguistically marked as derivatives of the base male forms. Thus we have *poetess* and *actress*, *songstress* and *situdette*, not to mention proper names such as *Jackie* or *Jeannette*.

That English is considered as a sexist language can also be manifested clearly in the normativeness of the male. In the view of Cyrus (1981, p.67), the male is regarded as a normative member of the species and this is expressed in many ways in English. These ways include, for example, the use of *man* to refer to all human beings and the use of *he* or *his* for a neutral pronoun as in the sentences: "*The infant* typically begins to sit up around 6 months of age. *He* begins crawling at about the same time." and "Everyone should do *his* bits.". Even "The Senators and Constitution of the United States is also replete with sexist language: Representatives are *he*. The President is obviously *he* and even the figurative from justice is *he* in the Institution" (Henberg, 1990, p.387).

As far as English slang vocabulary is concerned, there also exists differences among genders. More sexual slang is used to describe women than men. The most commonly chosen terms to describe women were *chick*, *bitch*, *babe* and *slut* while the most commonly chosen words to describe men are *guy*, *dack*, *boy* and *honey*. Concerning semantic features and pragmatic aspects, the terms used to describe women are more offensive than those used to describe men (Grawford & Unger, 2000, p.62).

Sexism in English also abounds in titles and occupations. *Doctors*, *phisicians*, *attorneys* and *astronauts* are almost men. *Nurses*, *midwives*, *teachers* and *secrectaries* are almost women. Lindsey (1997, p.77) noted, "when women enter predominantly male occupations, there is little attention given to how they are so-named. A woman may become an engineer and be referred to as a *female engineer* lest people think most

engineers are women. However, when males begin to enter predominantly female occupations in greater numbers, a language shift occurs rather quickly”.

In American, a girl is socialized to accept the fact that her name can literally be abandoned. Lindsey (1997, pp.77-78) further explained that upon marriage, a woman can lose her complete name and will be called someone different. For example, *Jane Smith* becomes *Mrs Richard Jones*. The new name and title will alter the earlier identity legally, socially and even psychologically. Even without little sanction, the belief that women and children should take their husband's and father's surname is adhered strongly.

4.1.2. Gender differences in language use among genders

Just as there are differences in the words referring to males or females, so there are also gender differences in the ways they use the language. In English, the same words, the same grammatical structures and even the same conversational strategies can be and are used by both women and men. However, “the frequency of the usage of these words and strategies and the situations in which they are used differs depending on the speakers' and listeners' gender as well as other characteristics of the speakers and situations” (Henberg, 1990, p.336). Concerning the differences in language use in general, females have been notably found to produce more standard language than males among American English speakers (Brown, 2000, p.259).

It is often claimed that women more frequently use certain language patterns that make their speech sound weak, tentative and emotional (Ivy & Backlund, 2000, p.201). These are, for example, the use of fillers and hesitation markers such as *oh, well, uh, um-m-m*, the use of hedges such as *sort of, kind of, I think*, the use of intensifiers such as *really* and *very*, the use of tag questions at the end of statements such as “*It is a nice day, isn't it?*” “*You like it, don't you?*” and the use of certain modal verbs such as *may, shall, could* or *would* in declaratives.

As far as the purpose of the talk or language use is concerned, there is also a great difference among genders (Ivy & Backlund, 2000, p.195). In most cases, women enjoy talk and regard talking as a means of keeping in touch, especially with friends and intimates. They use language to establish, nurture and develop personal relationships, whereas men tend to see language more as a tool for obtaining and conveying information. In other words, men's reasons for talking often focus on the content of the talk or its outcome rather than how it affects the feelings of others. It is women who rather emphasize this affective aspect of talk. This explains why women use softer words as mentioned above, complement others more than men do; and they also apologize more than men do.

Gender differences in the English language can also be underlined under the topic of politeness. Lindsley (1997, p.82) claimed that coupled with the use of tag-questions, women's speech appears much politer than men's. Furthermore, by keeping the conversation open, asking for further direction, not imposing one's view on another,

polite requests rather than forced-obedience also contribute to politeness. While men use imperatives with greater frequency, women will make politer requests and produce more encouraging feedback to their conversational partners than men do.

Concerning communicating manners, men are believed to talk more than women in public situations, especially on public or political issues while women tend to talk more at home, especially on domestic issues. By observing cross-sexed conversations, studies have also showed that men interrupt women more than the other way round, especially if it is to change topics (Zimmerman & West (1975); Eakins & Eakins, 1976; Holmes, 1995; Leet-Pellegrini, 1980). Interruption is typically viewed as an attempt to dominate and control a conversation by asserting one's rights to speak at the expense of another. From a conflict perspective, men's interruption of women is "an indication of differential power which asserts that it is the "right" for a superior to interrupt a subordinate" (Lindsey, 1997, p.82). However, when women interrupt conversations, they do so much to indicate interests in what is being talked about, to respond and to show support. What is more, during conversations, females are seen to be more inclined to males to face each other and make eye-contact when talking, while males are likely to look far from each other. When listening, women make more sounds of *fillers* or *hedges* such as *uhm*, *mhm* and *uhuh* while men are more likely to listen silently. In terms of nonverbal communication, women still perform better than men, too.

Because of the differences in interest and ability among sexes, the lexical distinctions that each sex makes is also different (Kottak, 2002, p.328). Men typically know more terms related to sports, make more distinctions among them and try to use these terms more precisely than women do. Correspondingly, influenced more by the fashion and cosmetic industries than men, women use more fashion and color terms and attempt to use these more specifically than men do. Another case in point is that socialization into language forbids profanity among genders in general, but more so for females. Men often use swear words or dirty jokes where women are often the targets of them. The explanation provided by Lyndsey (1997, p.81) is that males believe profanity demonstrates social power, and interestingly can be used to make them acceptable.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Reasons for gender differences in the English language

Concerning the reasons for gender differences in the English language, a variety of explanations have been proposed.

Some argue that innate biological and psychological differences account for gender differences on orientation towards others. Biological factors result in differences in conduct, with men being more aggressive and dominating, and women being more comportsing and nurturing (Nydon, 1977, p.192). As women are more concerned with making connections, they seek involvement and focus on the interdependence between people. Meanwhile, men almost seek independence and focus on hierarchical

relationship as they are born to have autonomy and detachment. It is, therefore, possible to see how such psychological differences might account for differences in the ways women and men use language in communication.

Other researchers put a great deal of stress on socialization as an explanatory factor. In American society, girls and boys experience different patterns of socialization and this, assumingly, leads to different ways of using and interpreting the language. As men tend to take on a more dominant role not only in the household, but also in the business world, it is more acceptable for them to be talkative, carry on long conversations, or give a long word speech. It is, on the contrary, less acceptable for a woman to do so. It has been more of a historical trend for men to have more rights to talk; however, it is common for men to be more silent in situations that require them to express intimate emotion. Gender differences in patterns of language use can be explained by the fact that girls and boys are socialized into different cultures. Each group learns appropriate ways of interacting from their same peers, including ways of interacting both verbally and nonverbally.

Another explanation attributes gender-based differences in linguistic behaviors to the differential distribution of power in society. In many cases, it is females' subordinate position that determines the language used about them. Tannen (1995) suggests that communication patterns of males and females differ, with males using direct and forceful styles, while females use a more indirect and intimate style of interaction. Men's greater social power allows them to define and control situations and male normal predominates in social interaction. It has also been suggested that those who are powerless must be polite than others. In communities where women are powerless members of a subordinate group, they are likely to be more linguistically polite than men who are in control.

It is widely agreed that an integral part of any culture is its language. Language not only develops in conjunction with a society's historical, economic and political evolution, it also reflects that society's attitudes and thinking. One of the most intriguing characteristics of language is that it acts as a kind of social mirror, reflecting the organization and dynamic of the society of which it is a part. Because of these functions, we can learn a great deal about American society by looking at some of the words used to refer to genders (Henberg, 1990, p.331). In explanation for these differences, Lakoff's theory (1975) on women's language suggests that females use a language style that reflects differences. Shyness and lower self-confidence of women indicate a lack of commitment or strong opinions as well (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

The relative status of the genders in a society may be reflected not only in the ways in which males and females use the language, but also in the language used about them. Linguistic data supports the view that women are often assigned to a subordinate status by virtue of their gender above, and treated linguistically as subordinate, regardless of their actual power or social status in a social context (Holmes, 1992, p.342). In English, the picture of the sexes is depicted differently. While women are seen as sentimental,

submissive and superstitious, men are seen as adventurous, forceful and independent" (Grawford & Unger, 2000, p.61). Conveying attitudes, language not only expresses ideas and concepts but actually shapes thoughts.

From sociolinguistic and cultural perspective, sexist language is considered to primarily produce sexist thoughts, thus bolstering the notion of female inferiority in a world of male superiority. Since the language they use deprecates, ignores and stereotypes women, women may be internalizing beliefs that they are lesser persons. High femininity in young girls is also associated with lower self-esteem (Lindsey, 1997, p.91). The fact that females tend to be politer than males reflects the fact that they tend to occupy subordinate positions in society. To some extent, the language of sexism not only portrays females as the second sex, but it also "contributes to their visual invisibility" (Henberg, 1990, p.391), relegating them "to the status of children, servants and idiots, to be the second sex and to visual invisibility" (Henberg, 1990, p.386).

Some people maintain that language not only reflects social values, attitudes, etc., but also reinforces them. It is, therefore, easier to talk about something than about others. Since many of the words that English offers for referring to women have sexual connotations, it is easy to talk about women in sexual ways. In other words, the language-based predisposition to talk about women in sexual terms makes it likely that a speaker will think about them in those terms. It is, in this sense, that "language may be said to reinforce, as well as to reflect, prevailing social opinions" (Henberg, 1990, p.236).

Gender differences in language are therefore considered to reflect the social roles of males and females. Two indicators of gender inequality in everyday life are "the general devaluation of femininity" and "the male dominance of conversations" (Nydon, 1977, p.191) Women's lower social status in English-speaking society is reflected in the language people use as well as the language used about genders. The worst of all is that sexist language can shape our thoughts or prejudices against females.

4.2.2. Suggested attitudes towards gender differences in the English language

As can be seen, gender differences in language is a hot topic to think about. Different anthropologists have had different opinions on this and the question of whether these differences or sexism in the language should be eradicated or not is still under strong debates in the present times. On the one hand, the relationship between gender and language can reflect society, giving us the insights into the social positions or roles of males and females. On the other hand, as language can shape our thoughts, linguistic sexism can shape our prejudices against women, leading to circulatory in our thinking and behavior. Our sexist language does affect our attitudes and behaviors which, in turns, affect our language. Although there are some changes in the language used about each sex as well as the ways each sex uses the language, there is still the belief that sexism in the English language does exist in English-speaking society.

Actually, the need to eradicate discrimination against females and to bring about the equality of the sexes has been realized by a variety of writers. It has been concluded that the eradication of sexism in the English language can also be considered as a key factor for this change in English-speaking society. As language and culture are intricately interwoven, in order to change our attitudes towards the roles of males and females, we should gradually change our sexist language.

For years, in an attempt to eliminate sexist references to women, people have proposed many changes, and many of these have been in use. These attempts have provided a powerful force for change in how women are referred to, what problems can be named and who can speak and can be heard (Grawforel, 2000). Best known among them are the title *Ms.* to replace *Miss.* and *Mrs.*; sex-indefinite substitutes such as *salesperson*, *mailcarrier*, *spokesperson* for the ambiguous generic *man* constructions; and the substitute for the generic *he*, such as the extension of the use of *they* to the singular, the alternation of *she* or *he* with *he* or *she* and the newly coined *she/he*. Nowadays, women are free to keep their names once married if they want to.

In fact, feminist movements have battled to eliminate some of the most blatant forms of gender discrimination (Nydon, 1997, p.191). This results in changes in gendered roles. Today, more and more fathers are taking care of little children, girls and boys are wearing unisex clothing and getting the same education. Women and men are working at the same jobs (Dish, 1999, p.75). Along with these institutional efforts, day-to-day struggles of educational women to combat linguistic sexism must be recognized. For example, more and more women are refusing to be called themselves, *girls* or to be referred to as *ladygolfers* or addressed as *chairmen*. Many professional women have also insisted upon the title *Ms.* The fact that many such changes are under way; however, also gives rise to another, equally important question: Will the eradication of sexism in the English language help to eliminate this bias from other part of society? The answer is, of course, "Yes". Language does, indeed, have the power to influence other parts of society. It can reinforce the society or it can work to facilitate change. An awareness of sexist language is essential if we are to understand the traditional roles of interaction between the sexes. Once we know these rules, we can work to modify them, to defy them, and to apply them to the language. From another perspective, males and females can also benefit from the eradication of sexism in the language.

As eradicating sexism and its negative effects on American society may help bring about the equality between males and females, both language teachers and learners should participate in the fight against sexism in the English language. Basically, language users should choose and use the language in a more inclusive and unbiased way in order to enhance our personal effectiveness in gender communication and developing our relationship (Ivy & Backlind, 2000, p.208).

Unfortunately, the eradication of sexism in the English language is really a hard

problem for us. This may take a lot of time and efforts. It is ideal to take the view that English is not sexist and gender differences mentioned in the study are just indications of linguistic diversities. As it is the prejudice against women that makes English an sexist language, changing the attitudes towards sexes can also help change sexism in English. Once we change our thoughts, the social roles of males and females will be changed and, as a result, the sexist language will be changed as well (Cyrus, 1981, p.69).

5. Conclusion

The study reviewed and systematized gender differences in the English language and their effects on English speaking people's attitudes towards the roles of males and females in English-speaking society. As teachers of English, we should be aware of these differences because it is this awareness that can help us understand a great deal of culture which, in turns, makes it easy for language learners to understand or use the language in the most appropriate way. From a socially constructive view, every of us should help eradicate sexism in the language on one way or another, changing people's attitudes towards the social roles among genders and bringing about real equality among genders in English-speaking societies as well.

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