

Contemporary Gender Language Characteristics of Male and Female - Coexistence of Differences and Similarities

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Received: 10 September 2023; Accepted: 22 October 2023; Published: 21 November 2023

Abstract:

With the development of society and the continuous improvement of women's status, there are differences and similarities between male and female languages. This paper discusses the gender language characteristics and reasons for them, as well as reflections on gender language, with a view to looking at gender language from the perspective of dialectical development, so as to promote the harmonious development of communication between the two genders.

Keywords:

Gender Language, Characteristics, Differences, Similarities, Reasons

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, with the rise of sociolinguistics and the wave of women's liberation movement in western countries, the issue of language and gender has become an important topic for relevant scholars to study, and the research at this stage is mainly manifested by the theory of gender linguistic difference or dichotomy, which mainly includes the Deficit Theory, Domination Theory and Difference Theory. These research models all emphasize the differences between male and female language, but ignore the similarities between the two genders at different levels of language, thus failing to reflect the complexity and diversity of the relationship between gender and language. The gender theory of social constructivism challenges these traditional theories with its view that the gender identity of language is constructed in social interactions. At present, most of the research on gender language in China is about its differences, and less about its similarities. In the study of gender and language, the author believes that the gender language phenomenon should be placed in a dynamic process of constant change, and at the same time focus on the differences and similarities between the two genders in the use of language, so as to correctly and objectively explore the relationship between gender and language, as well as to achieve successful cross-gender communication.

2. Differences in the Linguistic Characteristics between Male and Female

Language, as a way of human communication, has distinct differences between male and female languages. Although the two genders speak the same language, the difference in gender language can also make the same sentence produce different meanings. According to previous studies, men and women languages differ to a great or lesser extent in terms of Pronunciation and intonation, vocabulary, syntax and pragmatics.

2.1. Pronunciation and Intonation

In terms of pronunciation, compared with men, women make their pronunciation more standard, which is related to the sensitivity of female to speech sound and the higher desire for themselves[1]. In terms of pitch, men have a lower voice due to their long and thick vocal cords, while women have a higher voice due to their short and thin vocal cords, and female screams are generally thin and high-pitched. In terms of intonation, men usually use falling tone, with a flat, direct and certain tone, showing that their manner of speaking is firm and clear. Women like to use rising tone and speak with a variety of pitches as well as rich and exaggerated intonation changes, which shows the female language characteristics of activeness, hesitation and politeness.

2.2. Vocabulary

In using vocabulary, compared to men, women are inclined to use more adjectives, adverbs, interjections and other modifiers to convey their emotions and feelings, although these modifiers have little actual meanings. For example: “Wow, you’re really great!”. Here, “Wow” is one of the more commonly used modal words for women, and women commonly use this kind of modal words to convey positive feedback to others. Besides, women also like to use intensifiers like “so”, “very”. For example: “You are so cute!” “It is very nice!”. These words shows that women are more able to put themselves in the other side’s shoes and respond earnestly to each other, so that the other side can feel that they are valued, so as to make the dialogue go smoothly.

Women will also use more uncertain words or hedges to avoid a straightforward attitude to hurt other’s feelings by being blunt. For example, when expressing a refusal, men tend to respond directly and firmly with “No!” or “Don’t!”. While women generally respond vaguely and implicitly, like “Not so good” or “It depends”. The same is true in online conversation, where women’s chat often has a livelier tone, and accompanied by emojis, which can give the hard words on the Internet more rich emotions and avoid the embarrassing atmosphere, thus making the chatting atmosphere more vivid.

2.3. Syntax

Men generally use declarative and imperative sentences with a commanding and demanding tone to simply and directly express their views on things and issues, such as “Go, Let’s have a meal!”, “Shut the door!” and “No way!”... Women, on the other hand, tend to use more questioning and imperative sentences with a interrogative tone to seek the approval of others, and these sentences can also be used to express their opinions indirectly, such as “Are you hungry?”. The question here is not to get the other’s answer about “hungry or not”, but to express “I am hungry now, and let’s go to eat something!”. Or “It’s cold!”, here is essentially asking the listener to close the window or turn on the heater in a more polite way. In addition to, women often use tag questions to ask for affirmation when chatting, such as “Nice day, isn’t it?” or

“Nice food, right?”. At this time, women want the other person to give a positive answer to confirm what they are saying.

In conversation, women are willing to show their considerate and kind personality, so they strive to put themselves in the same position as the listener. While men are more inclined to hide their softness and show their firm personality, expecting to use straightforward words to show their power and ability[2]. In order to show their unique ability to deal with problems, men often put forward suggestions and solutions in dialogues. Since women are not very sure of the correctness and appropriateness of what they are saying, they often use expressions such as “I think” and “in my opinion” in their communication.

2.4. Pragmatics

Men and women like to talk about different topics. Men mostly talk about social news, politics, sports activities, etc., while women mostly talk about gossip, life, fashion, shopping and other aspects. It is generally believed that women are more talkative than men. In essence, it depends on the occasion. In public conversations, men will show their confident and talkative personality, while women will be particularly active in private conversations. This is because for men, conversation is mainly a way to provide and exchange information, while for women, it is a way to build up feelings and consolidate relationships, so women think that chatting about life trifles can enhance each other's feelings. According to Spender, women use a lot of polite language to talk about trivial and insignificant things, while men use a small amount of hard language to talk about important things[1]. Female language is often associated with maintaining social relationships, and achieving attraction to others through exaggeration, praise, and affirmation, whereas male language is generally used to maintain self-image or self-affirmation. Men think that women always talk about gossip, so women are labeled as nagging and gossipy. On the contrary, women think that the topics that men talk about are not close to daily life, so men are labeled as pretentious, bragging, and big talkers.

Greeting between men is usually just a simple “hi”, while greeting between women, a “hi” contains a lot of implied information. They might look at each other's hairstyles, clothing, skin texture, make-up and so on when greeting.

Previous studies have found that compared with men, women lack a sense of verbal humor, because they need to maintain their femininity such as formality, politeness and modesty for a long time, so the verbal delivery, production and understanding of women's humor is far inferior to that of men. Most of the famous comedians are men, such as Mr. Bean, Charlie Chaplin, Zhao Benshan. In the author's opinion, this only happens in public occasions, in private, women's humorous ability is actually not worse than men, and can even be more interesting than men. Just for the sake of dignity, so women rarely show their humorous ability in public.

3. Reasons for Differences

Although men and women use the same language, there are great differences in their language use due to physiological, cultural and social factors. Physiological factors are the basis, which is surface differences. While cultural and social factors are the underlying differences.

3.1. Physiological Factor

From the point of view of physiological characteristics, the human brain is divided into left brain and right brain. The left brain tends to be rational, accurate and logical, and the right side of the brain is emotional. Everyone has his or her own dominant brain, that is, which brain is more accustomed to using. In general, men are more left-brained and women are more right-brained, that is, men are more rational and women are more emotional.

3.2. Gender Subculture Factor

Men and women grow up in different environments and live in different subcultures. Gender speech styles also derive from the gender role patterns and social expectations that both genders have acquired in the long historic culture. Language is a reflection of culture. The fact that men and women belong to different social subcultural groups is a decisive factor in the formation of gender differences in language. Gender identity, gender role and corresponding behavior that go with them are accomplished in the process of human socialization. Society instills different values in men and women, thus forming different activity groups and behaviors[3]. Family education requires girls to use polite and euphemistic language, and requires them to be good listeners and to be receptive. If a girl speaks rudely, she will be considered not elegant, ungentle and uneducated, and will be teased for being “tomboy”. Boys, on the other hand, are expected to speak directly, to be manly and individualistic with a masculine character. It will be considered “sissy” if they speak indecisively.

Gender roles are the behavioral expectations that society places on both men and women, that is, the norms of behavior for both genders. Men are expected to earn money, be brave, independent, rational, etc. Women are expected to be good wives and good mothers, to be gentle, considerate and so on. Gender identity is gradually acquired in the process of growth, which results in the formation of different communication characteristics and rules, and gender attribution is also reflected in the behavior that conforms to one's own gender, thus forming a unique social subculture group [3].

3.3. Social Status Factor

The differences in language reflect the differences between the two genders in the real society as well. Therefore, the inequality of gender language is actually the embodiment of the inequality of gender status and power in the society. In the past, due to women's low social status, they were eager to win a decent social status for themselves, so they would deliberately modify their speech and use language close to norms and standards[4]. At the same time, due to their low social status, they would use more dodge words, tag questions and other sentences containing uncertain tone.

Due to the difference in social status and power, social prejudice and discrimination occur between the two genders. In the old society, women were always in a subordinate position while men were in a dominant position. Therefore, social discrimination, to a certain extent, prompted women to be self-restraint so as to conform to traditional female standards.

Lakoff pointed out that women's “powerless position” affects their speech style. Compared with the male style, the female style of speech should be euphemistic, hesitant, implicit and ambiguous. She argued that language reflects and reinforces social norms. Because men and women play different social roles and the unequal status in social life, so the differences in language use are naturally reflected.

Therefore, she believed that in order to eliminate gender differences in language, we should first eliminate the unequal status of men and women in society[5].

4. Similarities in Linguistic Characteristics between Male and Female

Aaron Cargile argues that the speech performance of a speaker does not depend on his or her gender, but on the characteristics of the communicative object, such as cultural background or current emotional attitude. He believes that the speaker's language expression is influenced by both the speaker's own stereotype and the external environment[6]. Among them, gender stereotypes belong to the characteristics of the speaker himself, and the influence of the external environment includes the influence of the current communication situation and the influence of the communication object. This also shows that whether men or women, there will be the phenomenon of saying different words when talking to different people. For example, people tend to pay extra attention to their superiors and respected people, while they tend to be more casual with familiar people. Or when teachers are teaching, both male and female teachers will appropriately slow down their speaking speed and simplify the sentences for fear that students can't keep up or understand.

Previous studies have found that men are slow to respond to conversation, and like to interrupt others, argue with people and control the topic, while women are more responsive to conversation, less interrupting others and paying attention to listening. However, in the author's opinion, with the development of society and the improvement of women's status, this phenomenon is not exclusive to a specific gender. Both men and women will control the topic, will argue with others, and will respond positively to the conversation. At the same time, modern men and women alike use language to demonstrate their self-confidence and boldness, with a clear purpose, and observe equality or consistency with each other.

5. Reasons for Similarities

5.1. Socio-cultural Context Factor

Socio-cultural context is an important factor leading to changes in gender language. According to the socialist construction theory, the gender identity of language is constructed in social interaction. As a result of the wave of feminist activities in the 19th century and the promotion of gender equality in modern society, women have become involved in various fields such as education, economy, industry, etc., and their social roles, social status and power as well as social expectations have changed.

Once upon a time, it was a common phenomenon that men earned money outside and women was a housewife at home. Men were in a dominant position and women had to rely on men to survive. In terms of language, men and women inevitably lost their equal rights in dialogue. Nowadays, women can dabble in important positions and fields just like men. Therefore, men and women live in the same social groups and have similar life experiences, and their social status and power have also changed, resulting in the phenomenon of similarities in gender language. For example, women can also control and dominate the conversation and participate in the discussion of topics such as politics, social news, sports etc. And men dabble in conversations about fashion, clothing and food.

With the development of the times, the progress of science and the improvement of women's social status, men and women are getting closer and closer in social

occupations, and the roles of men and women in the family are also changing, as well as people's ideological concepts are also advancing that overcoming the gender bias and gender discrimination left by the traditional society, all of which will inevitably promote the trend of mutual integration of men and women[7].

5.2. Social Mentality Factor

Under the influence of social factors, women's mentality has gradually undergone great changes. In the past, women were not well educated and did not have jobs, so they have little power and status. They were submissive, dependent and vulnerable, and their emotions were easily affected, so they tended to use hedges or tag questions to express their uncertainty. However, as society develops, women's awareness of gender equality is awakening, and they strive to fight for independence. Therefore, women will also use the language form that is once thought to be exclusive to men, as a way of demonstrating their self-confidence and decisiveness. Women's self-awareness has improved, especially women with higher education levels are more willing to express their views directly.

6. Reflections on Language and Gender

The unilateral emphasis on gendered linguistic differentiation is flawed, and this differentiation perhaps solidifies gender stereotyping bias, which leads to the failure of cross-gender linguistic communication.

The reason why scholars associate certain types of language with certain genders may be because gender stereotypes are so ingrained in people's minds. Women's language is like a dress, while men's language is like a tie, and these objects themselves essentially can be used by both genders, but both objects are prejudiced by the public to be exclusive to a particular gender.

People are often accustomed to using their own standards of language and behavior to measure each other, however, men and women have their own rules and standards for communication, so cross-gender conversations inevitably make communication misunderstandings inadvertently. For example, when couples talk, women often do not state their intentions directly and they complain only to seek comfort and understanding, and some men may not be able to comprehend the undermeanings of women's words, so that results in misunderstanding. Since women do not directly state their true intentions, it is difficult for men to understand what women are angry about. And likewise, men also think that women are too fragile, sensitive and emotional, thus creating communication misunderstandings. In specific communication, various objective and subjective factors should be fully considered, and the speech style should be adjusted actively and flexibly, so that the speech can be coordinated with specific communication, so as to correctly and effectively express and understand the speaker's meaning [8].

The tenderness and sensibility of women's speech and the frankness and straightforwardness of men's speech are both worthy of appreciation. Both men and women should give understanding and tolerance from the perspective of others, maintain a positive attitude, and give timely feedback, which can make the dialogue between the two sides smooth and effective, but also can make the relationship between the two sides become more harmonious.

7. Conclusions

Language is a mirror that reflects the historical features of society and a living fossil that records social life. At present, most of the domestic researches on language and gender focus on their differences, and few articles discuss their similarities. However, we should not only care about the differences in the use of language between men and women, but also pay attention to the similarities between them, so as to be able to explore the relationship between gender and language more comprehensively and objectively. Although social development has narrowed the social status and other differences between men and women, the social mentality, social consciousness and social habits formed over a long period of time cannot be changed immediately, and the development of society in different periods has endowed gender identity with different connotations. Today's research needs to change the unreasonable phenomenon of traditional gender identity, discard gender discrimination and gender prejudice, and form gender identity in a new era, so as to narrow the gender language difference and promote the harmonious development and equality of both genders in language.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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