GENDER LINGUISTICS AND SPECIAL FEATURES OF WOMEN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The current article discusses one of the new trends of modern linguistics such as gender linguistics as the sub branch of sociolinguistics. Moreover, the work provides as some main background information about the key features of gender or female discourse including politeness and conversation formulas in oral and written speech.

Keywords: social dialect, speech, syntactic construction, linguistic devices, hedges, boosters.

INTRODUCTION

While some social dialectologists suggested that women were status conscious, and that this explained their use of standard speech forms Robin Lakoff, an American linguist, suggested almost the opposite. She argued that women were using language which reinforced their subordinate status; they were 'colluding in their own subordination' by the way they spoke. Social dialect research focuses on differences between women's and men's speech in the areas of pronunciation (such as [in] vs [ih]) and morphology (such as past tense forms), with some attention to syntactic constructions (such as multiple negation). Robin Lakoff shifted the focus of research on gender differences to syntax, semantics and style. She suggested that women's subordinate social status in US society is indicated by the language women use, as well as in the language used about them. She identified a number of linguistic features which she claimed were used more often by women than by men, and which in her opinion expressed uncertainty and lack of confidence. Women's cooperative conversational strategies, however, may be explained better by looking at the influence of context and patterns of socialization. The norms for women's talk may be the norms for small group interaction in private contexts, where the goals of the inter-action are solidarity stressing – maintaining good social relations. Agreement is sought and disagreement avoided. By contrast, the norms for male interaction seem to be those of public referentially-oriented interaction. The public model is an adversarial one, where contradiction and disagreement is more likely than agreement and confirmation of the statements of others. Speakers compete for the floor and for attention; and wittiness, even at others' expense, is highly valued. These patterns seem to characterize men's talk even in private contexts, as will be illustrated below.

Methodology. The differences between women and men in ways of interacting may be the result of different socialization and acculturation patterns. If we learn ways of talking mainly in single-gender peer groups, then the patterns we learn are likely to be gender-specific. And the

kind of miscom- munication which undoubtedly occurs between women and men may well be attributable to the different expectations each gender has of the function of the interaction, and the ways it is appropriately conducted. Some of these differences will be illustrated in the next section.

Example 2

1. Lawyer: What was the nature of your acquaintance with the late Mrs E. D.?

    Witness A: Well, we were, uh, very close friends. Uh she was even sort of like a mother to me.

    2.   Lawyer: And had the heart not been functioning, in other words, had the heart been stopped, there would have been no blood to have come from that region?

    Witness B: It may leak down depending on the position of the body after death. But the presence of blood in the alveoli indicates that some active respiratory action had to take place.

The speech of the two female witnesses in example 2 contrasts in that witness A uses features of what Lakoff labelled 'women's language', while witness B does not. Before I describe these features, you might like to see if your intuitions about what constitutes 'women's language' agree with Lakoff's.

Features of 'women's language'

Lakoff suggested that women's speech was characterised by linguistic features such as the following.[1] [> indicates rising intonation].

(a)   Lexical hedges or fillers, e.g. *you know*, *sort of*, *well*, *you see.*
(b)   Tag questions, e.g. *she's very nice, isn't she?*
(c)   Rising intonation on declaratives, e.g. *it's really góod.*
(d)   'Empty' adjectives, e.g. *divine*, *charming*, *cute.*
(e)   Precise colour terms, e.g. *magenta*, *aquamarine.*
(f)   Intensifiers such as *just* and *so*, e.g. *I like him so much.*
(g)   'Hypercorrect' grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms.
(h)   'Superpolite' forms, e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms.
(i)   Avoidance of strong swear words, e.g. *fudge*, *my goodness.*
(j)   Emphatic stress, e.g. *it was a BRILLIANT performance.*

Many of these features are illustrated in the list of sentences in exercise 1. Lakoff's claims were based on her own intuitions and observations, but they sparked off a spate of research because they appeared to be so specific and easy to investigate.

Much of this initial research was methodologically unsatisfactory. Speech was recorded in laboratory conditions with assigned topics, and sometimes rather artificial constraints (such as a screen between the speakers). Most of the subjects were university students. Consequently, it was difficult to generalise from the results to natural informal speech in the community as a whole. In addition, the linguistic analysis of the data was often rather unsophisticated.

This quotation illustrates the kind of statement which betrayed lack of linguistic expertise among these early investigators of Lakoff's claims about women's speech. No linguist would describe 'will you please close the door?' as an imperative construction, and the expression

'imperative construction in question form' confuses form and function. (It is an interrogative construction expressing directive function.) Yet this was not untypical. Many of the categorisation systems devised by non-linguists to measure features of 'women's language' seem rather odd or arbitrary to linguists. Another study, for instance, made a distinction between 'fillers' and 'hedges', with *sort of* classified as a hedge, while *well* and *you see* were described as 'meaningless particles' and assigned to the same category as 'pause fillers' such as *uh*, *um* and *ah*. But this is a complicated area where form alone is never an adequate guide for classification, and function and meaning need careful analysis.

'The final syntactic category is imperative constructions in question form, which are defined as alternatives to simple and direct ways of ordering action. They are questions which are substituted for commands. "Will you please close the door?" instead of "Close the door" is an example of an imperative in question form.'

As well as lacking linguistic expertise, many researchers also missed Lakoff's fundamental point. She had identified a number of linguistic features which were unified by their *function* of expressing lack of confidence. Her list was not an arbitrary conglomeration of forms. It was unified by the fact that the forms identified were means of expressing uncertainty or tentativeness. Other researchers, however, ignored this functional coherence, and simply listed any forms that produced a statistical difference between women and men, without providing any satisfactory explanation for why these differences might have arisen. One study, for example, analyzed short sections from formal speeches by American female and male college students and found they differed on a range of features including the number of prepositional phrases, such as *at the back* (women used more) and progressive verb forms, such as *was walking* (men used more). Without a theoretical framework, it is difficult to know how to interpret such apparently arbitrary differences.

Nor did Lakoff claim her list was comprehensive. But because they ignored the underlying functional coherence which unified Lakoff's list of features, many researchers treated it as definitive. The internal coherence of the features Lakoff identified can be illustrated by dividing them into two groups. Firstly, there are linguistic devices which may be used for hedging or reducing the force of an utterance. Secondly, there are features which may boost or intensify a proposition's force. Researchers who recognized this functional unifying factor included in their analysis any form which had a hedging or boosting effect on an assertion. Those who didn't tended to stick to Lakoff's list as if it had been handed down like Moses' tablets.

Lakoff argued that both kinds of modifiers were evidence of an unconfident speaker. Hedging devices explicitly signal lack of confidence, while boosting devices express the speaker's anticipation that the addressee may remain unconvinced and therefore supply extra reassurance. So, she suggested, women use hedging devices to express uncertainty, and they use intensifying devices to persuade their addressee to take them seriously. Women boost the force of their utterances because they think that otherwise they will not be heard or paid attention to. Thus, according to Lakoff, both hedges and boosters' express women's lack of confidence.

Allocate as many as possible of the features in the list provided by Lakoff to one of the following columns.

Features which may serve as:
Hedging devices

Boosting devices

Answer at end of chapter

It is not surprising, given the range of methods used to collect and analyse the data, that the research results were often contradictory. In some studies, women were reported as using more tag questions than men, for instance, while in others men used more than women. Some researchers reported that women used up to three times as many hedges as men, while others noted no gender differences. Most, but not all, claimed women used more boosters or intensifiers than men. One pair of researchers recorded the speech of witnesses in a law court and found that male witnesses used more 'women's language' features than women witnesses with more expertise in court or higher occupational status.

Example 4 illustrates this:

Witness C is a male witness who uses a relatively high number of hedges and boosters. These researchers suggested the forms be relabelled 'powerless forms' to emphasise a point made by Lakoff herself, that the patterns she had noted were characteristic of the speech of the powerless in society rather than of women exclusively. (It is also worth noting that one could argue the witness was simply being cautious about his claims.)

Lawyer: And you saw, you observed what?

Witness C: Well, after I heard – I can't really, I can't definitely state whether the brakes or the lights came first, but I rotated my head slightly to the right, and looked directly behind Mr Z, and I saw reflections of lights, and uh, very very instantaneously after that I heard a very, very loud explosion – from my standpoint of view it would have been an implosion because everything was forced outward like this, like a grenade thrown into the room. And, uh, it was, it was terrifically loud.

Overall, however, Lakoff's claim that women used more hedging and boosting devices than men was borne out in a number of studies in English-speaking Western societies. But a more detailed analysis sometimes showed that these forms were not always expressing uncertainty.

Mary: I worked in that hotel for – ah eleven years and I found the patrons were really really you know good

Jill: Mm.

Mary: You had the odd one or two ruffian'd come in and cause a fight but they were soon dealt with.

Jill: Right, really just takes one eh? To start trouble.

Mary: Yeah, and and it was mostly the younger ones

Jill: Mm.

Mary: that would start you know.

Jill: Yeah.

Mary: The younger – younger ones couldn't handle their booze.

Jill: Mm.

Another aspect of the picture of women as cooperative conversationalists is the evidence that women provide more encouraging feedback to their conversational partners than men do.

To conclude, American studies of informal speech as well as talk in classrooms and under laboratory conditions have also demonstrated that women typically provide significantly more encouraging and positive feedback to their addressees than men do. One researcher noted that women students were also more likely than men to enlarge on and develop the ideas of a previous speaker rather than challenge them.

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