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A THEORETICAL ACCOUNT OF THE DIFFERENCES IN MEN AND WOMEN'S LANGUAGE USE

Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to discuss the theories which underlie the differences between male and female's language use. In light of this, the paper provides an overview of the dominant theories and approaches that have been provided in an attempt to understand the roots of men and women's differences in language use, especially in speaking. Discussion of gender and language is in light of certain accounts and studies that have focussed on certain striking linguistic aspects remarkably noticed in men/women's speech in different contexts.

Keywords: differences, gender, language, men, speech, women.

1. Introduction

Men and women use language differently. The differences may be small to the extent that people may not notice, or may even overlook, them because they are of no importance, or they may be significant to the extent that people can easily notice them. Over the few last decades, the area of language and gender has been attracting considerable attention. Research has led to many explanatory theoretical accounts and approaches to language and gender relationships, and many dominant theories have been introduced. The aim of the present paper is to discuss the dominant theories that explain the differences between male and female's language use, especially in speaking interactions.

In light of this, discussion is of a theoretical nature. It focuses on providing a general account of certain language differences and an overview of language theories and approaches to explain the source of language-gender differences. The paper highlights certain points of interest to any research investigation in the field, including theories, levels of language differences and the different factors that may influence male and female's language performances in different interactions.

2. Theories of Language-Gender Differences

Despite the fact that neither men nor women have been explicitly instructed in using language, both parts do, in fact, use language in different ways (Dunn, 2014). Due to certain noticeable differences in their use of language, many explanations and accounts have been introduced in the field of language and gender studies. These explanations have been advanced in order to understand and identify the factors which explain how these differences come about in the use of language (spoken/written). Several theories have also been developed and established

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in order to help researchers in the field of language and gender to understand and further investigate the differences in men and women's language behaviour. The following discussion focuses on providing and explaining the major theories about male and female's language differences in their respective order of occurrence.

4. The Invasion Theory

The invasion theory claims that the differences in male and female's speech are mainly due to historical wars and invasion. According to this interesting theory, differences in the language of the invaded country are likely to occur. The traditional eminent instances of language-gender differences that reflect the invasion theory stem from the West Indies. The first time the Europeans have arrived in the Lesser Antilles and interacted with the Carib Indians, they have discovered differences in male and female's speech. In fact, they have even thought that men and women speak distinct languages. A seventeenth century report has stated that:

The men have great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus, it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men (De Rochefort, 1665, as quoted in Trudgill, 1995, p. 64).

The report shows that the differences in male and female's speech are significantly apparent at the lexical level of language. Men and women do not speak different languages. In fact, they only speak distinct varieties of the same language.

A widespread explanation for the differences that are found in male and female's speech has been given by Caribbean Indians themselves. They have stressed the similarity between the speech of the Carib men and that of the Arawak women to whom they got married to. The Carib men have waged wars against the Arawak men, who are native inhabitants of the Lesser Antilles. The Caribs won the war, and the Arawak have been defeated and exterminated. The Caribs have, then, occupied the place of the Arawak men and married their wives (Aikhenvald, 2016). This point has been clearly stated in the following quote:

The savage natives of Dominica say that the reason for this is that when the Caribs came to occupy the islands, these were inhabited by an Arawak tribe which they exterminated completely, with the exception of women, whom they married to populate the country. It is asserted that there is similarity between the speech of continental Arawaks and that of the Carib women (Rochefort, 1665, as quoted in Jespersen, 1922, p. 237).

As it has been clearly shown in the Caribbean Indian speech, the language differences have been a consequence of the blend between

the Carib men and the Arawak women languages. Different speech styles have occurred as a result of war and invasion. The Caribs' victory could not, however, eliminate the existing language of the Arawak women, who continued to speak their language with children, but they used to speak to their new husbands using a pidgin Carib. The coexistence of the two parties has led to the creation of a multilingual situation.

Further examples have been found in Amazon and Japan. Levi-Strauss (as quoted in Spolsky, 1998, p. 36-37) has pointed out that, "an Amazonian father laughed at his young daughter for using the male word for hunting." Many cases have also shown that male's speech is different from that of female's. For instance, when American service-men have learned Japanese from women, people used to laugh at them, and they have become a source of amusement to those who knew the language. The reason behind that is related to the fact that the language that has been learnt is associated with women only.

5. The Taboo Theory

Taboo is another explanation to men and women's differences in language. Jespersen (1922) has claimed that in some cases, taboo can be a source of linguistic differences. He (1922) has pointed out that on a war-path, the Carib men use certain words and expressions that can be uttered only by adult men. It is believed that 'bad luck' can result if such words were to be used by women or uninitiated boys. This can lead to significant differences on both the lexical and the phonological levels of language. Taboo can also have significant influences on vocabulary. If Caribs' women are forbidden to use some words or names, they will, instead, use new ones. This can, hence, lead to sex-vocabulary differentiation.

Zulu is also an example where women were not allowed to use male's words or to mention the name of their father in law. Another example about male-female differences on the lexical level is found in the Chiquito, an American-Indian language of Bolivia. The female's word for 'my brother' is 'ičbausi', while the male's one is 'tsaruki.'

Similar examples have also been found in other pronominal systems of some languages. In English, for instance, only the third person singular is differentiated (he/she). In the French system, the third person plural is differentiated (ils/elles). The differentiation may extend to involve the second or even the first person as in the case of 'Thai', where in conversation, a male says 'phom' for the first person singular 'I', whereas a female uses 'dichan' to refer to herself (Jespersen, 1922).

6. The Prejudice Theory

Prejudice is also another theory that has been introduced in order to explain the factors that influence male and female's language. Differences in men and women's speech may arise from customs encouraging marriage outside the country. For example, when a person from village 'A' marries a woman from village 'B', the woman's speech will be characterized by many features of the dialect of her village.

However, such evidence is only prejudice which can be true as it can be wrong. People's impressions are not necessarily correct. For instance, it has been assumed for a long time that women talk more than their men counterpart, while the opposite has been proved (Spolsky, 1998).

7. The Educational Level of Theory

A crucial cause of male-female language-gender differences can be attributed to the level of education. It is claimed that the greater the differences between educational opportunities for both sexes are, the greater the diversity in male and female's speech will be.

In American ultra-orthodox Jewish communities, it is expected that men tend to spend more time studying traditional Jewish topics. As far as language is concerned, they become competent in both Yiddish and Hebrew, yet they remain weak in English. Women, on the other hand, tend to spend more time on secular studies. As a result, their English language becomes closer to the standard one. Women's Hebrew language knowledge remains weak, however.

Other studies in the Arab world provide evidence that education is the chief cause of the linguistic-gender-differences. In one village, it has been found that more linguistic differences are found in the half where girls have less education than boys, than in the half where both sexes are offered equal educational opportunities. What is more, is that women tend to be more sensitive to the status norms of the language (Spolsky, 1998).

8. Approaches to Language-Gender Differences

According to Coates (1986), research on language and gender can be divided into studies that focus on dominance and those that focus on difference. The two approaches have been advanced in an attempt to surpass some 'folk linguistic' assumptions about the way men and women use language.

8.1. The Dominance Approach

In this approach, the role of men in everyday interactions with women is seen as being 'operative'. Women are subordinate to men, and this reflects the dominance of men over them (Kunsmann, 1998). Research has shown some facts with regard to the lower or secondary status of women to men (Spolsky, 1998). Women are always referred to as girls, and this, in fact, lowers their status. For instance, in Hebrew, feminine forms are found only in lower ranks, and the use of generic masculine (he) like in 'Everyone should bring his lunch', illustrates and reinforces women's subordination and secondary status.

In her work 'Language and Women's Place', Lakoff (1975) has argued that women use many expressions of tentativeness and powerlessness in their daily interactions. They use tag-questions like: 'John is at work, isn't it?' And they also use declarative answers with a raised tone, like in: 'Bill is in his post office' (Aitchinson, 1992).

The use of tentative phrases is claimed to be associated with females. For instance, they may say a 'kind of' or 'sort of' instead of direct statement: 'Bill is kind of short' instead of 'Bill is short.' Women

are also accused to use raised intonation as in questions in their response to queries: ‘about eight o’clock’ as a reply to ‘What time is dinner?’ Such “insecure style of conversation seems to be typical of powerless people” (Aitchinson, 1992).

For Lakoff (1975), using a falling tone when saying a statement is a sign of lack of confidence. This involves expressions such as: John is here, isn’t he? And: the way prices are rising these days is horrendous, isn’t it? The latter reflects the speaker’s opinion which demonstrates insecurity (Ehrlich, 2004).

In a research study that has been conducted by Dubois and Crouch (1975), they have claimed, however, that tag-questions are not associated with women only. Men produce them more than women. Tag-questions do not only express uncertainty and insecurity; they may also function as expressions of politeness and for facilitating communication.

Showing Insecurity: I graduated last year, didn’t I?

Facilitating Conversation: Andrew this is our new neighbour, Frank. Andrew has just changed job, haven’t you?

In these two previous examples, Holmes (1993) has reported the following different functions of tag-questions in both men and women’s speech.

Table 1:

Male and Female’s Use of Tag Questions

Function of Tag Questions	Women	Men
Expressing Uncertainty	35%	61%
Facilitating	59%	26%
Softening	6%	13%
Confrontational		
Total	100%	100%

The results of this study show that tag-questions which express uncertainty are more used by men. Those facilitating communication are more used by women. In fact, tag-questions can have different functions, and their use depends on the speaker’s intention in a particular context.

In the same line of thought, according to West and Zimmermann (1983), the use of interruptions by men in a conversation represents a ‘site of conversational dominance’. When men interrupt, the topics are initiated and maintained by them. In a similar vein, Fishman (1983) has claimed that women’s role in conversation is to allow it to continue as long as possible. Women perform in order to sustain conversation with men; their purpose is not to dominate.

8.2.The Difference Approach

The difference (dual-culture) approach attempts to explain the differential ‘communicative behaviour’ of men and women. Both sexes use different linguistic styles. In childhood, children have plenty opportunities for developing different speech styles when talking in single-sex groups.

Tannen (1990) has stated that, "Male's styles prepare them better for public speaking, asking questions after lectures, talking in committees, presenting verbal reports and so on, while female's style is more 'private' suitable for establishing rapport" (p. 70).

In her best-selling book 'You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation', Tannen (1990, p. 47) has stated that "misunderstanding arises because styles are different and each style is valid on its own terms." That is to say, men and women's styles are different from each other, but they are equal.

In a study conducted by Coates (1986) investigating men-only and women-only discussion groups, she (1986) has found that when women converse with each other, a lot of private things about their lives are discussed and revealed. Women tend to stick to a single topic for a long time, give opportunity to other speakers to finish their personal feelings and participate in the discussion. In contrast to women, men,

competed to prove themselves better informed about current affairs, travel, sports,... etc. The topic changed often and men tried to, over time, establish reasonable stable hierarchy, while some men dominating conversation and others talking very little (Coates, 1986, p. 151-152).

Put differently, men's style of speech is competitive, while that of women is cooperative. Both Coates (1986) and Tannen (1990) have preferred to use the term 'style' instead of 'language' to make it clear that both sexes use the same language. The differ only in terms of style (Litosseliti, 2006).

In the 1970's and 1980's, it has been clearly emphasized that male's speech styles are competitive, whereas female's ones are cooperative. However, it is claimed that such studies have been based just on limited populations (White North America Middle Class) and have been over generalized to all women and men. In correction to such kinds of generalizations, Freed and Greenwood (1996) have claimed that when involved in same-sex intimate conversations with friends, men and women have shown similar behaviour: the one associated with women is a cooperative style of speech. In this case, it has been concluded that the emergence of this style of speech is not due to gender, but rather to the demand of particular types of talk (friendly). As a result of such study, great importance has been, therefore, given to both "communicative settings and tasks as possible determinant of linguistic behaviour that has [...] been treated as the effect of a speaker's gender" (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 307). In relation to what Ehrlich (2004) has stated, Cameron (1995) has also stated that 'Sociolinguistics says that how you act depends on who you are: critical theory says that who you are (and taken to be) depends on how you act' (p. 15-16).

In conversations, females seek to achieve solidarity. They try to upgrade themselves towards the use of the prestigious language. Men, on the other hand, seek to show power and dominate the conversation.

In addition to that, cases in the Western world have shown that women are said to have a tendency towards the prestige standard. Their speech is better than that of men, even colloquially speaking. It has been explained that women may behave in a 'Lady like' manner of speaking because of the society pressure exerted on them, or because they "may tend to have jobs which rely on communication rather than on strength" (Aitchinson, 1992, p. 117). Women's speech also tends to be closer to the prestige norm (R.P.) than that of men.

The general tendency is that power is associated with men, while solidarity is associated with women. In conversations, men try to dominate the whole conversation to protect themselves from attempts of putting them down. For them, life is a struggle to reserve independence and to avoid failure. Women's aim in speech, on the one hand, is to give confirmation and support, in addition to reaching and establishing agreement. Men's purpose, on the other hand, is to protect themselves from pushing them away. For women, life is a struggle to preserve intimacy and to avoid isolation (Hudson, 1999).

9. Gender Differences at the Level of English Syntax

In a diachronic study of gender differences in dramatic dialogue, Biber and Burges (2000) have observed that female authors portray both male and female characters as being involved and tentative than male authors. Various linguistic devices can be used to signal the speakers' commitment to the truth of the expressed proposition. Both tentativeness and politeness share the property of being expressed by these linguistic devices.

As far as the English syntax is concerned, Mondorf (2002) has conducted a study investigating language differences between men and women vis-à-vis the use of finite adverbial clauses (F.A.C.) both quantitatively and qualitatively. F.A.C. are of four types: causal, conditional, purpose and concessive clauses. Mondorf (2002) has found that causal, conditional and purpose clauses are highly used by women, while the concessive ones are used by men. Also, unlike men, there is a strong tendency on the part of women to use post-posed clauses.

Women prefer to use more post-posed A.Cs. than men do. Mondorf (2002, p. 166) has stated that, "the positional preference can be explained in terms of the information structure of F. A. C. The post-posed favoured by women are mainly asserted rather pre-posed." Post-posed clauses reflect a lower degree of commitment than that of pre-posed ones. Thus, one of the main reasons why women apparently use final clauses is to modify the proposition expressed in the main clause. Put differently, the post-position of adverbial clauses appears to be the default location for signalling one's limited commitment towards the truth of the proposition expressed in the main clause.

Unlike the case of women who prefer post-posed position, it has been found that their male counterpart prefer to use the kind of adverbial clauses that conveys presupposed information. Their clauses, therefore, express high commitment towards the truth of the expressed

proposition. Pre-supposed information often appears in final position. Men, then, tend to use F. A.Cs. to convey high commitment to the truth of the expressed proposition, while females use them in a post-posed manner for the opposite effect (Mondorf, 2002).

In line with what has been said, Holmes (1984) has pointed out to the relevance of positioning in the functional differentiation of hedges. For instance, the initial positioning of 'I believe' can express more certainty than final positioning. This central point is illustrated in the following examples:

'*I believe* that students are responsible for this'

'The students are responsible for this, *I believe*'

The initial placement of 'I believe' may strengthen the assertion, whereas its final positioning may reduce the strength of the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition. In the above example, the first case expresses certainty, and the second one expresses uncertainty (Holmes, 1984).

In fact, the factors that influence male and female's speech styles and language preferences differ from one situation to another. The differences cannot be explained in terms of one factor over the others since they all overlap to allow different types of differences to arise.

10. Discussion of a Short Sample of Street Talk between a Girl and a Boy

Male and female's everyday use of language differs a lot. This can be noticed in many different situations: at home, at work and, in the street and so on. In fact, men and women use distinct styles of speech and tend to play different roles when talking to each other. In what follows, there is a short sample discussion that focuses on certain language differences in the way both men and women speak in natural and authentic discourse.

The sample represents an everyday interaction. It is a short dialogue between a young girl and a boy who are native speakers of English. The type of interaction is a street talk. The dialogue is provided below.

Girl: "Ney. Y'know what?"

Guy: "Mmmm?"

Girl: "well, this kinda crazy guy comes up to me, you know? I'm, like, ready to run for the bank."

Guy: "Hah."

Girl: "It is really amazing that these people approach you in daylight, don't you think?"

Guy: "I know. I was at the movies once and some bum started asking me for money."

Girl: "Really? What happened?"
(Kunsmann, 1998)

As the above speech interaction shows, in the American culture, both the boy and the girl tend to use different speech styles. The boy tends to dominate the conversation by using interruptions such as

'Mmmm,' 'yeh' and 'Huh' in order to shift the topic to the one he prefers more: 'I know I was at the movies once and some bum started asking me for money.' The girl, on the other hand, tends to use many expressions of tentativeness as tag-questions: 'It's really ... don't you think,' and tentative phrases such as: 'well, this kinda crazy guy ...,' instead of direct statement 'this crazy guy.' Unlike men, women are more inclined to use a more indirect way of speaking. They also use some expressions like: 'really? What happened?' in order to show interest and to sustain the conversation with the boy.

11. Conclusion

Diverse language contexts and situations show many instances of language-gender differences in male and female's conversations (even writing). Many historical accounts have emphasized language and gender differences. These differences have been attributed to different factors, and have resulted in the introduction of many explanatory theories. One of the prevailing paradigms that should be given due consideration in language and gender studies is that of the social constructivism. Language is a reflection to society and culture is embedded in it. For that reason, studies in language and gender should be oriented towards notions of speech communities, communicative tasks and language contexts.

The aim of the present paper has been to discuss the theories and approaches that underlie men and women's differences in using language in real-life interactions. The theoretical discussion has been made in light of examples taken from different studies. What has been largely noticed in each study is the fact that men and women show different language behaviors. The latter can be approached from different perspectives, especially from the dominance and the difference perspective.

Research in the area of language and gender is of significant value, especially that it paves the way for further interesting research, not only in the English language, but also in the French and Arabic languages in the Algerian context. Despite the theoretical nature of the present paper, we suggest that future research should focus on men and women's use of language (spoken/written) in the Algerian context.

In addition to that, research should also be extended to involve discourse analysis of male and female's writing at the different levels of the language system (syntax, vocabulary, grammar, and so on). The area of language and gender will always be of significant importance and attracts researchers' attention given the interesting information it provides. Cross-cultural studies are also believed to be central in providing new results and important insights about the topic.

The present paper serves as an introduction for the researcher to conduct practice-oriented research in the area of language and gender. More interestingly, it establishes the ground for future research that will deeply focus on the relationship between language, gender and power through analyzing both the linguistic and social/cultural phenomena in a specific speech community.

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