AN APPROACH TO GENDER DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE

Adina DUMITRU[*]

Abstract: *The present paper approaches the issue of gender differences in language in a comparative perspective, referring both to English and Romanian. The first part of the paper presents a brief review of the emerging issue regarding gender and language relation. Then the sociolinguistic approach that has been amplified by the feminist movement beginning with the 70's of the 20th century has defined gender as a variable which determines the existence of genderlects. The comparative approach of the way gender manifests in English and Romanian represents only a starting point for further researches that can be extended to correlating these features with the way that gender determines verbal behaviour.*

Keywords: *gender, language use, verbal behaviour, genderlect.*

1. The present paper proposes a comparative approach of gender differences reflected in language, referring to English and Romanian. The relation between gender and language can be approached in two different ways, focusing either on gender encoding in each natural language or on the specific language use with men and women. Disregarding the adopted perspective, the data collected in various languages should not be interpreted in an ideological perspective. An accurate interpretation in a strict linguistic or sociolinguistic perspective could reveal that there are similar situations in various European modern languages.

The issue of women's language as different from men's occurred in linguistic studies especially after the 70's in the 20th century, so it is quite recent. Although the interest in it grew due to the extended feminist movement, this issue of gender differences in language was noticed many centuries ago. It is generally known that the speakers' opinions about language represent a clue for the language researchers, but they should consider that these opinions are influenced by the social rules. These empirical observations formulated by the language users who are not specialists cannot be considered but a starting point in analysing a certain language aspect in a scientifically perspective. In most of the world's cultures and languages there are proverbs or idiomatic phrases, based on a figure of speech changed into a usual, common expression by using it repeatedly, that refer to women's verbal behaviour. These stereotype images related to women and language have always a negative connotation, as women are considered to be too talkative and the topics of their conversations – facile and lacking interest in a social perspective.

A woman's tong wags like a lamb's tail. (England)
Many women, many words; many geese, many turds. (England)
On femme y a, silence n'y a. (France)
Onna sannin yoreba kashimashii. (Japan)

Another category of empirical observations about the issue of women's language consists of the evidences offered by the 16th century missionaries and explorers who interacted with the so-called 'primitive' societies in America, Asia or Africa. They mentioned a bizarre aspect regarding the different use of language

[*] University of Pitești, adina.elena.dumitru@gmail.com

BDD-A29956 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:04:47 UTC)

according to gender, i.e. men and women spoke differently and the bigger differences were, the less civilized the society was. The researches of the populations more or less civilized, anyway completely different from the European societies, revealed differences in verbal behaviour according to gender, which could be as numerous and profound as to determine the existence of two different variants of the same language. The anthropologists' and ethnologists' studies showed that, with certain archaic societies, the terms 'men's language' and 'women's language' are not exaggerated, as the two categories of language users were placed at that level on a scale with degrees of differences.

2. The anthropologists' and ethnologists' researches determined linguists' interest in studying the relation between language and gender. Although the issue of different language use according to gender had occurred in the first half of the 20th century, referring especially to 'exotic' languages, only after the 60's this domain was systematically researched. One of the first linguists that remarked the differences in language use determined by gender identity is Otto Jespersen who dedicated to women a separate chapter in his volume "*Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin"* (1922). Jespersen formulates a series of observations regarding the way women use language, asserting, for example, that women generally speak more politely than men, they tend to have a more reduced and less various vocabulary and they use certain adjectives such as *pretty, nice* and certain adverbs, such as *vastly, so* in a different way compared to men. According to Jespersen, women's contribution to preserving the purity of language and avoiding the vulgarity represents an important aspect referring to the Victorian period. These observations which imply the idea that men's language use represents the norm and women's language is deviant have been criticized by the feminist writers. The critics refer to the corpus of texts Jespersen used to formulate his observations, which consists of women's conversations in novels written by men, while the real way women use language is considered to be more relevant.

The development of sociolinguistics and pragmatics that focuses on language use, as a social action, regarding language in relation with those who use it, in a certain context with a specific goal/intention, has drawn the interest to the gender, as a determiner of linguistic variation. In linguistic studies, the terms 'sex' and 'gender' have been defined differently and the latter has been preferred to designate a cultural reality, while the former referred to a psychological and biological reality. Gender is regarded rather a variable in sociolinguistic approach, which determines genderlects and the feminist movement has focused especially on studying them in detail. The starting point for the studies upon women's language is considered to be Robin Lakoff's work *Language and Women's Place* (1975), due to the major influence it had upon the rest of the researches in this field. Even if not all Lakoff's arguments have been confirmed by the results of the further researches, nevertheless the hypothesis formulated has been referred to. The author presented a series of specific features of women's verbal behaviour which tend to become stereotypes:

"- Women's intonational contours display more variety than men's.

- Women use diminutives and euphemisms more than men.

- Women make more use of expressive forms (adjectives, not nouns or verbs and in that category, those expressing emotional rather than intellectual evaluation) more than men.

- Women use hedges of all kinds more than men.

- Women use intonational patterns that resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval.

BDD-A29956 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:04:47 UTC)

- Women's voices are breathier than men's.

- Women are more indirect and polite than men.

- In conversation, women are more likely to be interrupted, less likely to introduce successful topics.

- Women's communicative style tends to be collaborative rather than competitive.

- More of women's communication is expressed non-verbally (by gesture and intonation) than men's.

- Women are more careful to be 'correct' when they speak, using better grammar and fewer colloquialisms than men." (apud. Conrick, 1996: 2)

These features considered specific to women's language use are rather related to the conversational style and they do not appear as an inventory of the forms preferred by women that would cover all the levels of language. Moreover, there are certain features which are

3. There are two possible approaches of the relation between gender and language which can be clearly separated. Firstly, the way that gender is encoded in each natural language and the collected data can be interpreted in an ideological perspective. Secondly, the researchers examine the way that language is used by the male and female speakers, noticing the linguistic differences correlated with the gender differences.

The first type of approaching the relation between gender and language belongs to linguistics and the studies on the issue of gender in different languages, including Romanian, have a long-lasting tradition. However, the feminist perspective on how gender reflects in language raises a series of aspects which were not discussed in traditional linguistic studies. In the following paragraphs there are presented only a few aspects regarding the way gender is represented in language, at various levels, without aiming to approach all the problems of gender as a grammatical category.

When analysing the gender reflected in the language system, several aspects have been pointed out in many studies. In most of the dictionaries, gender, as a grammatical category, is considered conventional. As grammatical gender is not based on a natural distinction (considering the whole vocabulary), some objects, phenomena or even beings are ranged in different genders in different languages. While there are certain languages where gender is absent, there are others where there are two terms in the gender opposition (masculine/feminine) and others where the neuter occurs, so the social convention assigns the gender of a noun. However, the question whether this tradition regarding the gender of nouns is determined by social and cultural factors was frequently asked. Edward Sapir considered that the physical and social background of the users of a language is reflected in the lexicon of the respective language, which could be defined as "a complex inventory of all the ideas, interests and occupations that draw the attention of a community" (*apud* Petras, 1999:80). Any language, as a whole, not only its lexicon, represents a reflection of the society where it functions as a means of establishing contacts among its members, so an entire way of thinking and perceiving the world is encoded in the language system, while the changes in social and cultural life trigger changes in various compartments of language.

A series of aspects referring to grammatical gender have been studied thoroughly by linguists, logicians or philosophers for a long time, but in the last three decades of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, the feminist linguistic approach highlights the way language designs and promotes gender ideologies. In this perspective, languages 'name' the world by using a masculine view. The sexism of language represents a controversial topic which has determined changes

BDD-A29956 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:04:47 UTC)

in the way language is seen as a social reality. This point of view has been explained for the first time in Dale Spender's study, "*Man Made Language"*, where the starting point consists of the hypothesis that language "reflects a specific perspective about the world which consequently determines the conscience of speakers of that language" (Brădeanu, Dragomir, 2002:130). By asserting that men have a monopoly on producing meaning and perceptions of reality, while women use meanings which do not belong to them, the study was the subject of criticism, because, first of all, there is no clear evidence that defining or naming the reality represents exclusive men's control. Moreover, language is considered to be homogeneous and unitary and this is a false image, as, even if language is frequently associated with the standard variant, this does not represent a language in all its manifestations. "In a historical perspective, men were those who developed dictionaries and the quotations which offered examples of meanings belonged to male authors, not to female authors. However, language does not primarily exist in dictionaries, but in people, either men or women, who uses it." (Bradeanu, Dragomir, 2002:131).

Despite of the pertinent critics against the topic of sexism in language, there are many social traditions regarding the place and the role of women in public and private life reflected in language, especially in lexicon. The issue of these linguistic encodings of gender differences represented the objective of numerous recent studies about English or French, but grammatical and semantic asymmetry of the masculine/feminine opposition could be also found in Romanian.

3.1. At the level of **vocabulary**, the issue of gender occurs especially with several categories of words:

a) terms of addressing, titles and names; this category of words with a high frequency in use, as all the speakers use them, was subjected to a series of proposals formulated by the representatives of the feminist movement. A title could indicate the gender, the age of the person who is assigned to, but with women it can indicate also the marital status. For example, the English asymmetrical opposition *Mr. vs. Miss/Mrs.* can be also found in Romanian: *domnul vs. doamna/domnișoara*. The proposal to use a masculine term indicating also the marital status was not adopted in English, while in Romanian, the already existing term *domnișor* does not occur with the same frequency and meaning as the correspondent feminine term *domnișoară*.

The patrilineal lineage of the surname is another convention which reflects the position of woman always related to the opposite gender. Moreover, in certain linguistic communities, for example English, in official circumstances the term of addressing or denominating a married woman includes the first name of her husband (*Mrs. William Smith*). A similar situation can be found in Romanian or French, as a married woman can be assigned also her husband's title, especially when it is a military rank (*doamna colonel Popescu*). In French, the name of a agent which means also a title or a rank, when used in the feminine, generally denominates the titular's wife, not the feminine homologue: *la colonelle, la generale, l'ambasadrice, la prefete.* (Yaguello, 1979:123)

b) names of agent; while in English there is a great number of epicene nouns, thus ignoring gender, in Romance languages the issue of deriving the names of agent proves a sensitivity for gender category. However, there are English pairs of terms of *lord-lady* type where the feminine one has negative connotations (*dog-bitch, master-mistress*). The use of the suffix *–ess* is regressive in contemporary English, while the suffix *–ette*, borrowed from French, has got a pejorative and diminutive value (*suffragette, majorette, professorette*). The nouns derived with the suffix *–er* are epicene, but, especially with certain professions, the gender is marked by using one of

BDD-A29956 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:04:47 UTC)

the terms *male, woman, lady*. The professions considered to be feminine are marked by *male* for a masculine agent (*male nurse, male housewife*), while the jobs with a social prestige are reserved to men and a woman in such a position can be considered a dilettante; *woman* is a neutral element, while *lady* suggests superficiality, so that, for example, the terms *a woman-doctor* and *a lady-doctor* involve the evaluation of professional skills. In French, even if there are feminine names of agent derived from the masculine term with various suffixes (*-e, -essse*), the compound word including *femme* or *madame* is preferred (*femme-avocat vs. avocate, femme-ecrivain vs. ecrivaine, Madame le maire vs. mairesse, Madame le minister vs. ministresse*).

The hypothesis that the position of feminine gender mirrors the perception of woman in society can be illustrated by the situation of certain Romanian pairs of terms, such as *secretar-secretară*. The person with such a job is generally considered to be a woman, so the feminine term is used, but, if a woman is secretary of state, the masculine term is used to refer to her. A singular situation occurs with the pair *văduv-văduvă*, as the apparent semantic equivalence of the two terms differentiated only by gender is countered by their syntactic behaviour: *Maria este văduva lui Ion. vs. *Ion este văduvul Mariei.* This syntactic asymmetry reflects the social importance of woman's marital status, as well as its secondary importance for a man. In the same direction which proves that language reflects woman as a 'second rank' member of society, we can explain the pejorative meaning of certain feminine names of agent derived with the suffix *–esă* (*poetesă, tipesă)*.

c) nouns with a generic use; an example which is often offered is the English word *man*, referring both to the "human beings" and to "the male representative of humans". While in French there is also only one word for the two meanings, in Romanian there are two different words for these two meanings, *om* and *bărbat*, but the former tends to be used also with the meaning of the latter. In colloquial register, *omul* often denominates the husband, and *femeie* is also used with the meaning of wife, so the terms of the ternary opposition group differently (*om/bărbat vs. femeie*) and this tendency comes to confirm the idea that man, as a male representative of the species, is the one who represents it the best.

3.2. At **morphological and syntactic** level, the asymmetries between masculine and feminine are less numerous, at least in the European modern languages. In English, certain personal pronouns are used in the masculine form if the indefinite meaning is activated: *Every student should buy his own textbook.* In Romanian, when it comes to choosing the pronoun indicating the possessor, if the gender is not known, the possessive pronoun or pronominal adjective is preferred, as the gender opposition is neutralized with it: *Fiecare student trebuie să își cumpere cartea **sa***. In English, the proposal to use both the masculine and the feminine pronoun in the 3rd person singular when the gender of the referent is not known has been mainly adopted: *he/she, his/her*. "The use of *they* in the 3rd person singular with a general reference is very common in spoken language and it begins to be used also in writing" (Asher, Simpson, 1994:1359).

With French, the aspect discussed in the feminist linguistics regards the agreement of adjectives or participles in the masculine plural, even if there is only one masculine noun in the series: *Jean et les filles sont partis.* This rule was considered to be a proof of language sexism (Fr. *machisme*) in numerous linguistic studies focused on gender issue (Aebischer, 1983:12) and the same situation is to be found in Romanian (*Studenții și studentele sunt chemați la manifestare*).

4. The way gender correlates with the linguistic behaviour raised the interest of linguists, as well as the interest of a large audience. The systematic study of the

BDD-A29956 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:04:47 UTC)

differences determined by the gender of the language users proved that there are particular aspects in each language, but also common aspects that can be determined by a common social background and similarities in mentality. Moreover, even the traditional studies that approached the issue of gender encoded in language showed that there are similar situations in various European modern languages.

Bibliography

Aebischer, 1983 – *Parlers Masculins, Parlers Feminins*, Delochaux et Niestle, Neuchatel, Paris, 1983

Asher, Simpson (eds), 1994 – *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, vol. V, 1994

Brădeanu, Dragomir (eds.), Roventa Frumușani, Surugiu, 2002– *Femei, cuvinte și imagini*, Polirom, Iași, 2002

Capidan, 1935– *Bilingvismul și rolul femeii în păstrarea limbii* în "Familia", no. 8/1935

Conrick, 1996 – *Gender and Linguistic Stereotyping*, UCC, 1996

Irigaray, 1990- *Sexes et genres a travers les langues*, B. Grasset, Paris, 1990

Meunier, 2000- *Gender and Language Use* in "*Generations Text: Composition et Conversation en Francais"*, Heinle&Heinle Pub, 2000

Persson, Ryden, 1996- *Male and Female Terms in English*, Umea University, 1996

Petraș, 1999- *Limba, stăpâna noastră. Încercare asupra feminității limbii române*, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 1999

Yaguello, 1979- *Les mots et les femmes. Essay d'approche sociolinguistique de la condition feminine*, Payot, Paris, 1979

BDD-A29956 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 17:04:47 UTC)