GENDER AND LANGUAGE USE

Cristina UNGUREANU
University of Piteşti

Abstract*: Language and gender is a topic that is of interest in its own right; it is also important because of what it can add to our understanding of language and how it works, and to the sociolinguistic study of language. The focus of this research is on generalized gender differences. Is women's language a distinct style or register of a language? Are women more polite than men? Are there any differences in the way women and men interact? How is language used to refer to women and men? This paper gives answers while exploring diversity among women and among men.*

Keywords: gender, language, sociolinguistics.

Introduction

Sex differences are a fundamental fact of human life and it is not surprising to find them reflected in language. The idea that women and men use language differently has a long history. In terms of systematic empirical investigation, there are several interesting early studies dating from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, but the growth of language and gender as a major research area, began later, around the beginning of the 1970s. Observations of the differences between the way males and females speak were long restricted to grammatical features, such as the differences between masculine and feminine morphology in many languages.

Is women's language a distinct style or register of a language? Are women more polite than men? Are there any differences in the way women and men interact?

Linguists studying several languages have found evidence of 'sex-exclusive' language forms, that is, cases in which an obligatory grammatical distinction is made female and male speakers. The linguistic forms used by women and men contrast – to different degrees – in all speech communities. There are other ways too in which the linguistic behaviour of women and men differ. It is claimed women are more linguistically polite than men, for instance, and that women and men emphasize different speech functions.

Women's and men's languages

The classic example of linguistic sex differentiation comes from the West Indies. It was often reported that when Europeans first arrived in the lesser Antilles and made contact with the Carib Indians who lived there, they discovered that women and men 'spoke different languages'. This would of course have been a very startling discovery, and one that does not appear to have been paralled anywhere else in the world. A report from the seventeenth century says: "The men have a 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 women had another language than the men." (Trudgill, 1974:86)

BDD-A5633 © 2008 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:10 UTC)

The first widely influential study of language-use features was presented by Robin Lakoff. Her work led her to conclude that 'woman's language' had the overall effect of submerging a woman's personal identity.

Lakoff suggested that women's speech was characterized by linguistic features such as the following (Lakoff, 1975: 6):

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 good.*
d. 'Empty adjectives', e.g. *divine, charming, cute.*
e. Precise colour terms, e.g. *magenta, aquamarine*.
f. Intensifiers such as *just* and *so.*
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

Robin Lakoff claimed that women use a number of language features that, collectively, indicate uncertainty and hesitancy. The features, argued Lakoff, deny women the opportunity to express themselves strongly, and make what they are talking about appear trivial. She pointed out, for example, that for the most part , women are not expected to use 'strong' expletives, such as *damn* or *shit*, but are encouraged to substitute weaker ones like *oh dear* or *fudge*. This difference in linguistic acculturation between men and women permits men the opportunity to express strong emotions with impunity. Tag questions usage, represents another example of the submersion of women's individualities. The use of question intonation with assertion syntax is quite similar. In answer to the question, "When will dinner be ready?", women would tend to answer "Around six o'clock?" Women would feel inclined, or perhaps obliged, to adjust dinner time to suit the convenience of other members of the family. On the other hand, if asked "What time are we leaving for our trip tomorrow?" it would seem natural to expect a man to reply with something like "At 7.30 and I want everyone to be ready".

Lakoff's claims were based on her intuitions and observations but some researchers considered her investigation to lack linguistic expertise.

Studies of gender differences have shown the power of stereotyping. A *poet* is taken more seriously than a *poetess*; women's status is lowered by references to the *girls*. In Hebrew, only the lower ranks in the army (up to the rank of lieutenant) have feminine forms. The use of **generic masculine** ('Everybody should bring *his* lunch, we need to hire the best *man* available", however well-meaning and neutral the speaker's intention may be, reinforces the secondary status of women in many social groups. With the growth of social awareness in this area over the past decades, there have been many attempts to overcome this prejudicial use of language (Spolsky, 1998:37).

Some linguists have suggested that women use more standard speech forms than men because they are more status-conscious than men. The claim is that women are more aware of the fact that the way they speak signals their social class background or social status in the community. Standard speech forms are generally associated with high social status, and so, according to this explanation, women use more standard speech forms as a way of claiming such status.

A second explanation for the fact that women use more standard forms than men points to the way society tends to expects 'better' behaviour from women than

BDD-A5633 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:10 UTC)

from men. Little boys are generally allowed more freedom than little girls. Misbehaviour from boys is tolerated where girls are more quickly corrected. Similarly, rule-breaking of any kind by women is frowned on more severely than rule-breaking by men. Women are designated the role of modeling correct behaviour in the community. Predictably then, following this argument, society expects women to speak more correctly and standardly than men, especially when they are serving as models for children's speech.

Instead of asking 'why do women use more standard speech form than men?' it makes maybe more sense to ask 'why don't men use more standard forms'? Let's take a look at the following dialogue (Holmes, 1992:174):

Knocker: Comin' down the club Jim?

Jim: Not friggin' likely. It's rubbish that club.

Knocker: It ain't that bad. Music's cool. I seen a couple of sharp judies there too. If we plays our cards right … Anyways you was keen enough las' week.

Jim: The music's last Knocker. I'm off down the Pier' ead if there ain't nothin' better than that on offer.

Knocker: Bleedin' rozzers crawlin' round down there. Come down ours instead.

One possible answer to the above question is that men prefer vernacular forms because they carry macho connotations of masculinity and toughness.

Another possible explanation for women's use of more standard forms is that people who are subordinate must be polite. Children are expected to be polite to adults. Women for a long time considered as a subordinate group, it is argued, must avoid offending men – and so they must speak carefully and politely.

Empirical studies of gender and talk have documented several specific features of conversational style that are said to differentiate between female and male speakers. Examples of these are (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, Leap, 2000: 230):

- *Amount of talk*: male speakers have been found to talk more than females, particularly in formal or public contexts.
- *Interruptions*: male speakers interrupt female speakers more than vice versa.
- *Conversational support*: female speakers more frequently use features that provide support and encouragement for other speakers, for example 'minimal responses', such as *mmh* and *yeah*.
- *Tentativeness*: there are claims that female speakers use features that make their speech appear tentative and uncertain, such as 'hedges' that weaken the force of an utterance ('I think maybe …', 'sort of', 'you know' and certain types of tag questions (It's so hot, isn't it?)
- *Compliments*: a wider range of compliments may be addressed to women than to men, and women also tend to pay more compliments.

Consequently, a feature often associated with so-called women's language is *politeness*. Brown and Levinson (1978) show that politeness may be specifically related to the degree to which interlocutors care for the *face wants* of one another. They characterize these wants as (1) *positive* – the need to be liked or admired, and (2) *negative* – the need to be left alone or not imposed on.

Nancy Bonvillain's in "Language, Culture, and Communication" (http://logos.uoregon.edu/explore/socioling/gender.html) notes that, "women typically use more polite speech than do men, characterized by a high frequency of honorific

BDD-A5633 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:10 UTC)

(showing respect for the person to whom you are talking to, formal stylistic markers), and softening devices such as hedges and questions."

Sociolinguists try to explain why there is a greater frequency of the use of polite speech from women than from men. In our society it is socially acceptable for a man to be forward and direct his assertiveness to control the actions of others. However, society has devalued these speech patterns when it is utilized by women. From historical recurrence, it has appeared that women have had a secondary role in society relative to that of the male. Therefore, it has been (historically) expected from a women to "act like a lady" and "respect those around you." It reflects the role of the inferior status being expected to respect the superior. In Frank and Anshen's "Language and the Sexes", they note that boys, "are permitted, even encouraged, to talk rough, cultivate a deep "masculine" voice and, if they violate the norms of correct usage or of polite speech, well "boys will be boys," although, peculiarly, it is much less common that "girls will be girls" Fortunately, these roles are becoming more of a stereotype and less of a reality. However, the trend of expected polite speech from the female continues to remain. This is a prime example of how society plays an important part on the social function of the language.

Nevertheless we have to signal that nowadays the female protagonists are able to engage in angry confrontations, flouting the norms of language behaviour.

Can a language be sexist?

The study of sexist language is concerned with the way language expresses both negative and positive stereotypes of both women and men.

Feminists have claimed that English is a sexist language. Sexism involves behaviour which maintains social inequalities between women and men. Can a language contribute to the maintenance of social inequalities between the sexes?

It has been suggested that the English language discriminates against women. Most obviously, perhaps, in the semantic area the English metaphors which describe women include an extraordinarily high number of derogatory images compared to those used to describe men.

The chicken metaphor tells the whole story of a girl's life. In her youth she is a *chick*, then she marries and begins feeling *cooped up*, so she goes to *hen parties* where she *cackles* with her friends. Then she has her *brood* and begins to *hen-peck* her husband. Finally she turns into an *old biddy* (Holmes, 1992: 337).

Janet Holmes points out that animal imagery is one example where the images of women seem considerably less positive than those for men. One should take into account the negativity of *bitch, old biddy,* and *cow,* compared to *stud* and *wolf*. Animal imagery which refers to men often has at least some positive component (such as wiliness or sexual prowess). *Birds* are widely regarded as feather-brained and flighty. Even the more positive *chick* and *kitten* are sweet but helpless pets. Terms which were originally neutral or affectionate eventually acquire negative connotations as they increasingly refer only to women, and as their meanings focus on women as sexual objects.

Words for women have negative connotations, even where the corresponding male terms designate the same state or condition for men. Thus, *spinster* and *bachelor* both designate unmarried adults, but the female term has negative overtones to it. Such a distinction reflects the importance of society's expectations about marriage, and more

BDD-A5633 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:10 UTC)

importantly, about marriageable age. A spinster is more than a female bachelor: she is beyond the expected marrying age and therefore seen as rejected and undesirable.

These cultural stereotypes about old maids being losers in card games and the marriage market also affect the term *maiden*, as in *maiden aunt* or *maiden lady*, and notably even phrases such as *maiden horse* to refer to a horse that has not won a race. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s entry on figurative uses of the term maiden defines them as sharing the meaning of 'yielding no results'. Other figurative uses such as maiden voyage, maiden speech, maiden flight, etc. referring to the first occasion or event of a kind relate to the stereotype that women should be virginal, inexperienced, intact, untried, and fresh in worldly as well as sexual matters (Romaine, 1994:107).

If anyone has any doubt about the negative connotations of *spinster*, all they need to do is look at its collocations. Although there are some neutral descriptive adjectives used with the word, such as *66 year old, disabled*, or *American*, the majority of words collocating with spinster are negative. They include the following: *gossipy, nervy, over-made up, ineffective, jealous, eccentric, love-/sex-starved, frustrated, whey-faced, dried-up old, repressed, lonely, prim, cold-hearted, plain Jane, atrocious*, and *despised*. By comparison, the collocations of bachelor are largely descriptive or positive, with the exception of one occurrence of *bachelor wimp*.

Collocations transmit cultural meanings and stereotypes which have been built up over time. If the problem lies not with words themselves, but how they are used, this poses considerable problems for reform which targets the elimination of sexist language. Seemingly gender-neutral terms such as *aggressive* and *professional* have different connotations when applied to men and women. To call a man a professional is a compliment, but to be a woman and a professional is perhaps to be a prostitute, in English as well as in other languages as Romanian, Japanese, French, where *une professionelle* is a euphemism for prostitute.

This sort of bias in the connotations of words for women is far-reaching and applies to associations of the basic terms *man* v *woman*. Men are likely to be referred to with positive adjectives such as *honest* and *intelligent*, while only women are described as *silly* and *hysterical*. Negative terms such as *frigid, neurotic, loose* relating to sexuality occur predominantly with the female terms, as do terms such as *blond*(e) and *ugly* describing appearance.

Conclusion

In all human societies individuals will differ from one another in the way they speak. Some of these differences are idiosyncratic, but others are systematically associated with particular groups of people. The most obvious of these are associated with sex and developmental level: women speak differently from men, and children differently from adults. These two dimensions of social variation in language are in part biologically determined (for example, differences in laryngeal size producing different pitch levels for adult men and women), but in most societies they go beyond this to become conventional and socially symbolic. Thus men and women differ by far more in language use than mere pitch.

Eventually there was a campaign to reduce sexism in language in the English-speaking world which was quite successful. Other speech communities such as the Dutch have experienced similar changes, but it is by no means clear that this campaign can be transferred to other languages. There is a general point that the changes brought

BDD-A5633 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:10 UTC)

about by the feminist language reform demonstrate: languages can be profoundly affected by deliberate choices of the speakers.

Bibliography

Holmes, J., *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Longman, 1992
http://logos.uoregon.edu/explore/socioling/gender.html
Lakoff, R. *Language and Woman's Place*., New York: Harper & Row., 1975
Mesthrie, R., Swann, J., Deumert, A., Leap, W, *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, Edinburgh University Press, 2000
Romaine, S., *Language in Society. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Oxford University Press, 1994
Spolsky, B., *Sociolinguistics*, Oxford University Press, 1998
Trudgill, P., *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction*, Penguin Books, 1974

BDD-A5633 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:53:10 UTC)