

## THE STUDY OF WOMEN'S AND MEN'S LANGUAGE: A QUESTIONNAIRE-BASED STUDY

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DOI: 10.7813/2075-4124.2015/7-2/B.69

Received: 05.01.2015

Accepted: 24.03.2015

### ABSTRACT

As most of the studies on genderlect and social stereotypes reveals there are some significant differences between women's language and men's. It has been believed that women are polite, respectful toward social norms and emotional while men are less polite, carefree, dominant in conversation and interested in to mundane issues. This study tried to investigate about these differences through asking 60 participants' opinions (30 men and 30 women) by questionnaire in Iranian context; the questionnaire is based on the previous related studies and theories. The results indicate that men and women are by some means similar in their language in certain respects and some of the previous studies were quite intense in illumination of the differences.

**Keywords:** Standard Language, Politeness, Culture, Genderlect

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Women's speech was different from men's in use and content. Men speak about objective things using non-standard forms straightly while women like to talk about psychological issues, express their feelings and observant of politeness norms using standard language (Haas, 1979). Women not only use standard form more frequently but also they are the leaders of the linguistic change irrespective of their social classes (Labov, 1990). In this article we explore briefly about the differences exist between men and women's language besides the reasons of these differences. First, let's define the term genderlect which is not quite unrelated to the issue "From a postmodernist perspective, genderlects must be seen as stereotypical resources for gendered stylization practices that are not to be equaled with how women and men actually speak" (Motschenbacher, 2007 p 1).

#### 1.2. Review of the Related Literature

One of the controversial studies about the tendency of women to use polite form of the language belongs to Trudgill. In an article titled "Sex, covert prestige and linguistic change in the urban British English of Norwich", Trudgill through investigation by eliciting the pronunciation of "ing" from different gender in different social classes claimed that for men using non-standard form of language has some kind of covert prestige while women try to use appropriate forms more commonly regardless of their social classes. Middle-class women tend to use standard language and working-class men to non-standard form. Trudgill explained that phenomenon by asserting that women, contrasting men, gain their status in society through their appearance and symbolic tools, not by their job or salary (Trudgill, 1972).

Lakoff answered this question by elaborating on females' psychology; he proposed that women usually hypercorrect because they feel subordinate comparing to their male participants. They use "women's language" because their marginal role and lack of power in society and this inferiority shaped the expectation that they are not allowed to express their feelings and state their words with uncertainty. Even the use of language itself was not that ineffective in shaping this label; using marked form of the words for women such as: widow/widower, waiter/ waitress, mister/ mistress, etc. or the use of generic masculine as in "everyone should bring his lunch, we need to hire best man available." (Spolsky, 1998; p. 38), although referring to females too, reinforces the concept of females' secondary status (Lakoff, 1973; Spolsky, 1998).

This issue is even bolder in Japanese language in which women's speech differentiated from men's in terms of politeness besides lexical and morphological usage which absolutely correlates with their secondary status. But the theory of women's politeness is not true in all languages' in Malagasy village women's tend to violate the norms of politeness more regularly than men; they express their anger and criticism straight forward unlike their men who tries to use face saving acts more often. (Martin, 1966; Keenan, 1974)

However, P. Brown (1980) rejected aforementioned claims and noted women's politeness goes back to several unwritten rules which they follow during their interactions such as creating rapport with their addressees and convincing their addressees that there is no intentional face threatening act; moreover, they are obeying some irrational stable beliefs in societies such as "be polite" or "don't speak loudly" which they brought up with. Further she hypothesized that women use negative politeness when she felt subordination and positive politeness in case of existing "multiplex relationship" in their social link (Elizabeth Bott cited in Brown, 1980).

Not so unrelated to the notion of politeness, the hypothesis that women are usually more polite than men and use taboo or slang or any other expression which might undermine their prestige, face and politeness less than men has been proposed by numbers of scholars (Flexner, 1960; Lakoff, 1975; Spender, 1980).

According to Graddol and Swann (1989) stereotypes about men's and women's language are rooted in history; these stereotypes are preserved by "proverbs, jokes, journalism, literature and even by serious language scholars". Through these stereotypes, women are typically known as "chatterboxes, endless gossips or strident nags patiently endured or kept in check by strong silent men" (Graddoland Swan, 1989: 2).

Bradley (1981) in her studies "The folk-linguistics of women's speech: An empirical examination" found that "linguistic devices used by women in this society are devalued"; obviously women's ample using of tag questions and disclaimers were considered as their lack of knowledge about the subject of the discussion. The results also showed that irrespective of structural or substantive techniques, women were not as remarkable men's and it is all because of the women's lower status.

As another characteristic of women language we can name using intensifiers which regularly leads to hyperbole in their speech; women tends to use words like: so or such much more often than men do (Key, 1972; Lakoff 1975; Spender, 1980)

Kollock, Blumstein, Schwartz (1985) investigated which factors (power or sex) affect in men and women's conversational duties. By observing the interaction between three groups: couples with equal amount of power, men dominant couples, women dominant couples they found that interruption, backchannels and tag questions are due to power irrespective of the sex while talking time and question asking links to both power and sex. In a related study Zimmermann and West (1996) stated that men in their conversation tend to control the topic and they do it without obvious reaction; they showed that men tend to dominant the floor in conversation with women and do not want to be on an equal footing with female participants.

Given an equal chance of education, normally women, because of their loser multiple networks compare to men, wind up to be more observant in using standard norms of society (Spolsky, 1998). Furthermore, females utilize standard variations of any stable variable which use is acceptable for both sexes more frequently than males do (Nevalainen, 2002).

Newman, Groom, Handelman and Pennebaker (2008) with the use of word count technique, investigated about the way men and women use language in terms of their word choice and the way of expressing it. Their results showed that females used words about social and psychological process while men used words dealing more with "object properties and impersonal topics".

Considering all the aforementioned investigations, we should be aware that gender unlike sex is tightly bounds to people's culture; it means gender is much of a cultural and social entity. It is possible to born as a girl but grows and behaves in a masculine manner. "Gender is learned" and ones gender shape due to his/her cultural and societal boundaries. Like what has been mentioned young girls are always cautioned about their behaviors. They are expected to be polite, gentle, taking care of others unlike little boys (Wood, 2013).

All of the mentioned researches have been done in other countries. The aim of this study is to analyze the noted hypothesis in Iranian context and through questionnaire based on previous findings ask the own women about the reason of their politeness or using standard language.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.3 Background information on the participants

Participants of this study include both male (N=30) and female (N=30) of Iranian society. They have been chosen from different social classes with various educational degrees. Data were gathered both by sharing in social networks and handing to the subjects personally in order to make sure covering all types of social classes. Subjects were asked to answer 10 items of a questionnaire by selecting the gender for each statement. Also there was a dialogue in last part of the questionnaire in which participants were obliged to guess the gender of the characters.

### 2.4 Instruments and materials

The instrument of this study is a questionnaire which is constructed from the combination of other questionnaires of the related studies. In the first part there are 10 items each of them are statements about characteristics of definite gender and are based on a theory of a genders' language; the idea of this part of the questionnaire was taken from White's study on stereotypes about language and gender (White, 2004). The second part of the questionnaire includes an unspecified dialogue between two characters; the dialogue was taken from Karlsson's MA thesis about gender-related differences in language (Karlsson, 2007). After finishing the editing of our questionnaire, the pilot study was run to check the reliability which was (Cronbach alpha= .8). The participants' job to ascribe a gender to each item based on their own beliefs and cultural norms. In addition to man and woman choice for each item there is another alternative called "both" for items which are true for either man or woman.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire includes 11 items, each of which was based on a theory about women's language. In the first part of the result and discussion tables related to Chi Square total data (non- parametric) tables' are presented and following that is the analysis and discussions.

Q1

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	3	20.3	-17.3
male	40	20.3	19.7
both	18	20.3	-2.3
Total	61		

Q2

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	7	20.3	-13.3
male	29	20.3	8.7
both	25	20.3	4.7
Total	61		

Q3

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	41	20.3	20.7
male	2	20.3	-18.3
both	18	20.3	-2.3
Total	61		

**Q4**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	43	20.3	22.7
male	1	20.3	-19.3
both	17	20.3	-3.3
Total	61		

**Q5**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
male	43	30.5	12.5
both	18	30.5	-12.5
Total	61		

**Q6**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	19	20.3	-1.3
male	12	20.3	-8.3
both	30	20.3	9.7
Total	61		

**Q7**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	23	20.3	2.7
male	25	20.3	4.7
both	13	20.3	-7.3
Total	61		

**Q8**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	17	20.3	-3.3
male	7	20.3	-13.3
both	37	20.3	16.7
Total	61		

**Q9**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Female	10	20.3	-10.3
male	17	20.3	-3.3
both	34	20.3	13.7
Total	61		

**Q10**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	23	20.3	2.7
male	21	20.3	.7
both	17	20.3	-3.3
Total	61		

**Q11a**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	56	20.3	35.7
male	1	20.3	-19.3
both	4	20.3	-16.3
Total	61		

**Q11b**

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
female	1	20.3	-19.3
male	56	20.3	35.7
both	4	20.3	-16.3
Total	61		

Gathered data based on the questionnaire of this study shows that:

1. *Being interested in telling dirty jokes and taboo words*

4.9% of the subjects attribute these behaviors to women, 65.6% to men and 29.5% thought that would be true for both men and women. The Chi-square analysis shows that just the result for men is more than expected ( $19.7 > 1.96$ ). As a result the majority believe that women are more polite than men which have been claimed by many scholars such as Haas (1979), Martin (1966), (Keenan, 1974) and many others who know women as being the courteous gender.

2. *Speaking loudly*

11.5% of the participants thought that would be true for women, 47.5% for men and 45% for both; moreover the Chi-square analysis revealed that the result for women only is less than expected ( $-17.3 < 1.96$ ). Again in this case previous scholars' findings turn out to be true. As it can be seen from the data few people expect women to speak loudly maybe all and all Brown (1980) was right about claiming that there are some irrational stable beliefs in societies which hinder women from talking loudly or being rude.

### 3. *Tendency to gossip*

The majority know women to be the gossipers, about 67.2%, while this behavior seems quite impossible for men, as only 3.3% of the population thought so. Moreover 29.5% attribute it to both genders. Chi square analysis shows that only women's tendency to gossiping is more than expected (20.7>1.96). As data shows Graddol and Swann (1989) claim about social stereotypes turns out to be true in this case.

### 4. *Tendency to talk about feelings and psychological issues*

As Lakoff (1973) and Haas (1979) proposed women tend to express their feelings freer than men and the result of this study proved this point too as 68.9% vote for women in this case, 1.6% for men and the rest for both. The difference between men and women are quite significant and undeniable. An interesting point found in this study is that between female participants of this study 86.7% of them attribute this behavior to women and none of them found merely men to have this manner so. Chi-square result also approved the finding; as the women's gossiping was more than what was expected (20.3>1.96).

### 5. *Tendency to talk about job, football or sexual matters*

The data shows that the societies' stereotypes about men and football are not that irrelevant as 70.5 of the population in this study accept it and none of them thinks these are among the women's favorites, plus 29.5% of the subjects attribute it to both genders. Chi-square results indicate that this attitude was more than expected just in men (12.5>1.96). As Trudgill 1972 claimed, women usually cannot express themselves through their job as men do.

### 6 and 7. *Tendency to interruption in the middle of conversation versus trying to be a good listener in arguments*

These two items are quite related to each other as some scholars believe that in a debate between man and woman, man does the interruptions and woman tries to listen more. Let's see what the results show: 19.7% of the subjects know the men as an interrupter (31.1 for women) and 37.7% believe the women to be a good listener (41.1% for men). Chi-square analysis shows that only both genders result was more than expected in item 6 (9.7>1.96) and in item 7 the result for each genders are more than expected (2.7>1.96; 4.7>1.96). Unlike what Zimmermann and West (1996) found in their study which claimed men control the floor in discussion.

### 8 and 9. *Trying to be accepted in society versus tendency to keep his/her features whether good or bad*

Again these two items are related to each other. Majority of the subjects thinks that being accepted in society is a common phenomenon for both genders as 60.7% chose both, 27.9% decided on women and 11.5% on men. 55.7% of the population thinks both genders tend to keep their behaviors as it is, 16.4 consider the women to be so and 27.9% accept it for men. For both items the Chi-square analysis shows that just both genders results are more than what was expected (16.7>1.96; 13.7>1.96). The results for these items are not in line with what Trudgill (1972) and Lakoff (1973) have claimed in this regard.

### 10. *Tendency to hyperbole*

As some scholars have claimed, women tend to use intensifiers which regularly lead to hyperbole in their speech (Key, 1972; Lakoff 1975; Spender, 1980). But the result which is drawn from this study does not show that apparently, for it indicates that 37.7% of the subjects think that is true for women, 34.4% of them think it is right about men and the rest select both genders. The Chi-square result shows that tendency to hyperbole is more than expected in women only (2.7>1.96).

11. This item was a conversation between two characters; character A was emotional and polite while tends to gossip and using tag question (which are women's characteristics); whereas, character B was careless and using swear words (which are men's characteristics). Most of the participants have the same idea as 91.8% of them consider A as woman and 91.8 of them consider B as a man which is totally in line with previous studies. The rest of them who were more flexible about social stereo types believe that each of these two items can be of a man or woman; furthermore the Chi-square analysis shows that in item A the result for women is more than expected (35.7>1.96) and in item B just the result for men is more than expected (35.7>1.96).

The differences between genders are statistically significance in all items ( $p \geq .05$ ), except item 7 (.13 $\geq$ .05) and item 10 (.63 $\geq$ .05).

## 4. CONCLUSION

The study of genderlect and differences between men's and women's language have been one of the hot debates for many scholars. Several researchers using psychological and sociological findings and believes proposed quite intense claims on women's language such as Trudgill (1972), Lakoff (1973), Bradley (1981), etc. Women have been considered as irrational, emotional and subordinate gender compare to men, who are reckless, confident and dominant in either social or psychological domains. Meanwhile some studies like Brown (1980) explained the phenomenon differently and criticized the previous claims and social labels.

This study tries to test the major previous findings in a form of questionnaire in a new context. The results indicated that women's and men's language might be different but not as palpable as it has been claimed; However, we cannot deny that society always expect the females to be gentler than males. But intensity of some the previous claims such as women's tendency to hyperbole, men are controlling the discussions and some other assertions have been mitigated in this inquiry's findings.

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### Appendix

#### Questionnaire:

In your opinion which group is related to the each statement?

1. Being interested in telling dirty jokes and taboo words  
Female/male/ both
2. Speaking loudly  
Female/ male/ both
3. Tendency to gossip  
Female/ male/ both
4. Tendency to talk about feelings and psychological issues  
Female/ male/ both
5. Tendency to talk about job, football or sexual matters  
Female/ male/ both
6. Tendency to interruption in the middle of conversation  
Female/ male/ both
7. Trying to be a good listener in arguments  
Female/ male/ both
8. Trying to be accepted in society  
Female/ male/ both
9. Tendency to keep his/her features whether good or bad  
Female/ male/ both
10. Tendency to hyperbole  
Female/ male/ both
11. Read the following dialogue:

#### Dialogue

A: I think it was quite horrible...

[B looked at A and then looked down in the newspaper.]

B: ...mhm...

A: Well, you know... I really felt so bad about the boy. Such a nice boy! You didn't feel bad for him, did you?

B: Shit!

[B spilled coffee all over the floor.]

A: Oh, my goodness! Did you get any coffee on you?

B: God damn it... Give me some paper!

A: You might say 'please'. It wouldn't hurt, you know.

In your opinion which one of these characters were man and which one was woman?

A: ... B: ...