Gender Differences On Language

Abstract

Language is used as a tool for human communication, and because of the human beings are the users of language, the study of language should not be made just from the perspective of symbol and should also be people-oriented. As speakers of special language, people try to express themselves, their beliefs, expectations by means of their choice of vocabulary, speaking style and so on. Furthermore, the attitude of speakers towards their language usage, communication habits can depend on the differences between gender characteristics. People of different genders either physiology or psychology have different gender characteristics in their language usage. This study aims to investigate the gender differences between men's and women's language, both genders' conversational styles and phonological variations.

Key words: Sociolinguistics; Language; Gender differences

Introduction

Sociolinguistic studies define the relationship between the language and society. It studies the way people speak differently in different social contexts and also gives reasons for why and how people speak differently (Holmes, 2006). Language is a mirror of society and because of language we can understand the society, social activities better. Because of the language can be only understood in its social context, we can not separate language and society. In any social interaction, members of interaction have different linguistic choices and these choices are influenced by following social factors; first, the participants i.e. who is speaking and whom and the relationship between them or the social distance. Second, the social context of the conversation or the setting i.e. the place of the interaction will influence the kind of linguistic repertoire used. For example, in court sessions the type of language will be formal, but informal in cafés. Third, the topic of the interaction affects the linguistic choices; the language used in discussing an academic subject is different from that used in talking about everyday life conversations. Finally, the function of the interaction determines the type of linguistic repertoires used in an interaction, is the function of the conversation referential i.e. to give information or to express feelings (Holmes, 2008).

A major topic in sociolinguistics is the connection, if any, between the structures, vocabularies, and ways of using particular languages and the social roles of the men and women who speak these languages (Wardhaugh, 2006). Studying the way of men and women talk has been one of the interesting topics, objectives of sociolinguistics research in 1970s. In the beginning of 1970s, the first theories appeared which discussed the issue of gender differences in language. These theories implied that men owned some characteristics which women lacked in. In this period, it was still believed that men dominated women in all areas, which is why occupations were presented only in male gender (Savi?, 1995). In the past, women were not regarded as good orators, as they were not given the chance to speak publicly (Tannen, 1998). In the beginning of the 1980s, the first opponent of this theory presented. It was completely new approach, which regarded gender differences as the consequence of diverse socialization of boys and girls. This approach is also defined as two cultures theory, as it represents differences

which could also be applied to different cultures (Cameron, 2003). In the beginning of 1990s, the third approach appeared. In this contemporary approach, the previous two theories were contrasted and the idea of language activity was created. This approach claims that, once we describe who, why, and how discusses a topic, we can define the characteristics of their speech. This theory is called social power theory, since language is regarded as the means for the creation of social structure and power (Bergvall, 1999).

Literature Review

People define the language as a system of communication based on words and sentences to make our communication meaningful and understandable. However, the ways language is used are not the same in different countries, by different people and by different genders. One of the main topics in sociolinguistics is the study whether men and women use the language in different ways.

Do men and women use language differently? If there are differences in the language used by different gender, what linguistic aspects are different? And what are the reasons for those differences? To answer these questions many sociolinguists have a lot of research and surveys. In their study about language and gender sociolinguists focus on two important things. The first one is the differences in linguistic aspects the two different genders use in their language. The second thing is the reason why there are such differences.

According to Baron (1986), the most typical example of gender difference is found among the Carib Indians. He reports that male and female Caribs speak different languages, dating back to the time when the Carib speaking men killed the Arawak-speaking men and mated with the Arawak women. Their children are described having different languages as the boys learn language from their fathers and girls learn language from their mothers. Holmes (1992) also reports similar cases, such as in the community in the North-West Amazon basin, the husband and the wife speak a different language altogether because the people in that community must marry outside their own tribe. For instance, the husband speaks a language called Tuyuka which the wife also uses with the children but when she speaks with her husband, she uses her own tribal language which is Desano and he replies in Tuyuka.

Lakoff (1975) and Holmes (1992) claim that in some languages, the male speaker’s form is longer than that of the female’s. For example, women are more likely to say “Will you help me with these groceries, please?” than to say “help me”. Another example is Yana, a North American Indian language. For the word “deer” Yana women say “ba” while men use “bana” or women say “yaa” for the word “person” but men say “yaa-na” and so is Japanese where some male forms are longer. A recent investigation on over 200 people made by Pennebaker and Stone (2003) shows that in written and spoken text, the mean words-per-sentence was 23.4 for men and 19.1 for women compared to a standard deviation of 35 words.

Language and Gender

The main content of sociolinguistics is the study of language structure and social context. In terms of language structure, gender difference reveals the relationship between gender and language. Gender differences are the fundamental facts of social life and human differences. It reflects that there is a long historical origin in language difference phenomenon. Men and

women have different status and play different roles, so they have different duties and different rights. Some sociolinguists explain the formation of language difference with the unequal status of men and women. In the past, there was a big difference between men and women in the society, even now in some societies, men and women are not treated equally. For many years, men were seen as the dominators of the status and power, while women were considered to be weak and only do activities in the family.

Gender differences in language are not only regarded as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a social phenomenon and become the popular subject of linguistics and sociolinguistics. The linguists from all countries have made a lot of profound significant exploration according to the gender differences of language use phenomenon to explain the cause of gender difference.

Lakoff (1975) studies women's language in the USA. He characterizes the linguistic features of women language as:

1. Lexical hedges or fillers (you know, well, you see)
2. Tag questions (she's very nice, isn't she?)
3. Rising intonation on declaratives (it's really good)
4. Precise color terms (magenta, aquamarine)
5. Intensifiers such as just and so (I like him so much)
6. 'Hypercorrect' grammar (consistent use of standard verb forms)
7. 'Super-polite' forms (indirect requests, euphemism)
8. Avoidance of strong swear words (fudge, my goodness)
9. Emphatic stress (it was a BRILLIANT performance)

Men and Women Difference in Their Using Language

Jiménéz-Catalán (2000) claims that individual differences such as age, aptitude, learning style and motivation are very-well focused on in most SLA research studies, but gender is often ignored. Besides, as Ehrlich (1997) and Sunderland (2000) points out, even in studies where gender was included into research, it was perceived in an oversimplified way. Gender differences in language is objective, and even in society using the same nation language or region dialect, it is common to see different languages because sexual, physiological and social factors.

Different genders will cause the different variations of languages, there are two aspects of reasons: first, when the traditional social status is different, their mental state will be different; second, men and women play different roles in society, their participation in social activities and the scope of their activities in society also have great differences, and all these factors resulted in the variation of their language. In the study of language and gender differences, many linguists concluded that: in different contexts, men and women have differences to a degree in phonology, vocabulary and grammar, syntax options.

The differences between men and women are discussed from the aspects of utterance-choosing, pronunciation and intonation, vocabulary, syntax, attitudes, and non-verbal differences.

1. Gender Differences in Utterance-Choosing

In social interaction, men and women have different interests in choosing their topics. Women's talk is associated with the home and domestic activities, while men's is associated with the outside world and economic activities. Men usually talk in all kinds of competitive topics like sports, politics, economy, current news, while women's topics are usually about family life, such as education of children, clothes, cooking, fashion, individuals and emotions. So the dialogues showing directly one's inner lives are more from women, on the contrary, men tend to hide their feelings.

2. Pronunciation and Intonation Differences

Phonological differences between the speech of men and women have been noted in a variety of languages. If we set English pronunciation as an example, after many researches, lots of linguists have found women's pronunciations are more close to pronunciation standards. Usually women's pronunciation is more correct, concise and better than men's, such as the pronunciation of "-ing". Shuy (1969) made a study in this field, and he found that 62.2% of men pronounced "-ing" in a wrong way, but only 28.9% of women didn't pronounce right. This can also be shown in the learning of the second language. Usually female students have better pronunciation than male students, and that can explain the reason why more girls choose to learn language as their major than boys.

For intonation difference, Chinese Academy of Sciences once conducted an experiment to test the intonation values of men and women. They chose eight men and eight women to let them read ten of Mandarin vowels and found that women's intonation values were obviously higher than men's.

Usually, intonation changes mean rich expressions, so women prefer to use several intonations in one sentence. On the contrary, men prefer falling tones rather than modified tones. Women use more modified tones. For example:

M: When will our lunch be ready?

W: Oh....around 12 o'clock?

W means if there isn't any problem, it must be 12 o'clock. She is the only responder who knows the answer, but she uses the rising tone. This reflects her euphemistic, modest character and soft introverted temper. Lakoff (1975) says that women usually answer a question with rising intonation pattern rather than falling intonation. In this way, they can show their gentleness and sometimes this intonation shows a lack of confidence. On the other hand, men like to use falling intonation to show that they are quite sure of what they are saying. Falling intonation also shows men's confidence and sometimes power.

3. Vocabulary Difference

Men and women tend to choose different words to show their feelings. These differences in vocabulary can be shown in the following aspects;

- color words

Women are good at using color words that were borrowed from French to describe things, such as mauve, lavender, aquamarine, azure and magenta, etc, but most men do not use them.

- Adjectives

Women prefer to use more adjectives, such as adorable, charming, lovely, fantastic, sweet, but men seldom use them. The use of more adjectives in describing things and their feelings indicates that women are more sensitive to the environment and more likely to express their emotions with words. For example, when a woman leaves a restaurant, she will say “It’s a gorgeous meal”. If a man wants to express the same idea, he may only say, “It’s a good meal”. It makes women’s language more interesting than men’s language sometimes.

- Adverbs

The language differences between men and women can be seen in using adverbs. Women tend to use such adverbs like awfully, pretty, terribly, quite, so; men like to use very, really. In 1992, Jespersen found that women use more so than men do, such as, “It was so interesting” is often uttered by a woman.

- swear words

Women more focus on the manners and politeness of using language. They tend to use euphemistic expressions and cautious words like my dear, oh God which men will not care about. Women usually avoid using slang and dirty words even they are really angry. Because women are more gentle and they believe that these kinds of words destroy the relationship between her and others.

- pronouns

Women prefer to use first person plural pronouns when they suggest something, even when she suggests the other person, but men tend to use first person singular pronoun, and when he is suggesting the other person, he will directly use the second person pronoun. Example:

Women: We need to be in a hurry.

Men: You need to be quick.

4. Differences in Syntax

Women pay more attention to the correctness of syntax and grammar. While expressing her thoughts, she would make her utterance clear by using precise grammar. For example:

Woman: We are going to go to the park today.

Men: We are gonna to the park today

Syntactic differences are mostly seen in using questions. According to Lakoff’s researches women are more likely to use an interrogative sentence to express their idea, and they like to

use tag questions, because tag questions can make the tone less tense. For example, “She is a very nice girl, isn’t she?” These types of sentences are not common in men’s daily expression. And if men want to express the same views, they will choose the direct way “The girl is very nice”. Tag question will make the speaker’s tone more euphemistic and modest.

5. Differences in Manner

Women usually show politeness in their conversation, such as the using of “would you, please, etc”. Generally speaking, in a conversation, women often play the role of patient listeners. They do not interrupt others often, but encourage others to talk. On the other hand, men are eager to be heard. Men do not like to be silent. This makes them appear to be more active than women.

Methodology

This chapter contains the research methodology used for conducting the research. It includes the instruments, participants, and process of analysis. Questionnaire consists of multiple choice item and it was distributed to the students of two different universities. The research deals with a quantitative survey on the impact of gender variation in language use. The objective of the research is to find out effects of gender variation in language use.

Participants

The participants of this research are twenty students from two different universities. Among participants, ten of them are boys and ten are girls. The age range of the participants is 18-23.

Instruments

The participants were given questionnaires for conducting the survey. Printed forms of questionnaire have been distributed among the participants. The questionnaires included 9 multiple choice questions consisting of 2 options. In each of the questions students had to choose one specific answer. It also includes two questions on which respondents are expected to write their own thoughts and beliefs.

Findings and Analysis of Process

Results of participants multiple choice questions.

Questions Options Boys (%) Girls (%) Total (%)

In a conversation, what type of language do you use? Formal Language 1 (10%) 5 (50%) 30%

Informal Language 9 (90%) 5 (50%) 70%

While in a conversation, do you use tag questions like “…isn’t it?”, “…don’t you?”, “…right?” Yes 4 (40%) 9 (90%) 65%

No 6 (60%) 1 (10%) 35%

In a conversation, how do you talk? Talk loudly 9 (90%) 6 (60%) 75%

Talk softly 1 (10%) 4 (40%) 25%

Do you use swear words and slang like “shit”, “damn” in your daily conversation? Yes 8 (80%) 2 (20%) 50%

No 2 (20%) 8 (80%) 50%

What type of language do you use? Direct Language 9 (90%) 1 (10%) 50%

Indirect Language 1 (10%) 9 (90%) 50%

Do you use words like “So”, “Such”, “Pretty”, “Quite”? Yes 6 (60%) 7 (70%) 65%

No 4 (40%) 3 (30%) 35%

In a conversation, do you interrupt? Yes 10 (100%) 6 (60%) 80%

No 0 (0%) 4 (40%) 20%

Do you use more gestures when you are speaking? Yes 5 (50%) 9 (90%) 75%

No 5 (50%) 1 (10%) 25%

Do you use language like “would you”, “please”? Yes 7 (70%) 9 (90%) 80%

No 3 (30%) 1 (10%) 20%

Discussion

The focus of the research was to find out the gender difference in language use. According to participants’ answers, while using language in a conversation, 70 percent of participants use informal language and in case of using informal language majority are boys. Similarly, in other questions, in case of talking loudly, using swear words, interrupting and using direct language majority are boys. However, in case of using tag questions, more gestures, talking softly, using words like “please”, “would you” majority are women. It means women tend to use more polite and model language.

Limitations

The research has been concluded with only twenty people. Opinions of more people would be more valuable and conclude more exact results. But it would be harder to cover more people because of shortage of time. Moreover, open-ended questions has not been answered completely by some participants.

Conclusion

Lots of social factors can be reflected from language and at the same time can impact to the content of language. Language and social factors both make effect with each other. Sometimes, social environment’s effect on language use results in gender differences in language.

According to the research study, men and women’s languages differ from each other. These differences appear mostly in vocabulary use, voice and tone, syntactic structure of language. We notice that women prefer to use more adjective and vivid words, more expressive gestures in their utterances of by moving their hands, face and other parts of their body that men rarely use.