

Social Cognition of Gender and Language

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Abstract: *The question, Do men and women use language differently played a central part in the emergence of feminist socio linguistics more than two decades ago, and it casts a long shadow. This paper focuses on the literature that has contributed to the understanding of the major research questions underlying two major strands, language and gender, concentrating on the development of the literature from the deficit and dominance models to the social constructivist era of post-modernism in order to provide a context for recent developments in language and gender theories. This article tries to investigate the social cognition of gender and language*

Keywords: *Social, cognition, language, gender theories, social construct.*

Introduction

The major thing that distinguishes human beings from animals is basically our way to communicate with each other by using language. We have words for specific things, emotions, expressions and it appears as though we have words for everything when thinking about it. In each language; words are constructed in a certain way. When working with language, it is quite possible to determine whether a word belongs to one stem or another just by looking at it even if the person has no clue of the word's meaning which is quite fascinating. The question, do men and women use language differently played a central part in the emergence of feminist socio linguistics more than two decades ago, and it casts a long shadow. This paper focuses on the literature that has contributed to the understanding of the major research questions underlying two major strands, language and gender, concentrating on the development of the literature from the deficit and dominance models to the social constructivist era of post-modernism in order to provide a context for recent developments in language and gender theories.

Gender versus Sex

In defining gender, the concept of sex, male and female with their accompanying nations of masculinity and femininity are also included within this definition. Eckert and McConnell – Cinet (2003) argue that sex is a biological categorization based primarily on productive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. In their view, the definition of males and females, people's understanding of themselves and others as male and female is ultimately social. They also show that gender is a learned behavior which is both taught and enforced, and leading to the conclusion that gender is collaborative in the sense that it connects individuals to the social order. By this, gender is not something we have but that we do. The idea of doing gender is explained by Coates (1998) who says that doing/performing gender is presenting oneself as a "gendered being".

Overview of Language and Gender

Through time, society has gone through great changes which have influenced our languages. New vocabularies have been added to our languages and old-fashioned words have been replaced. Each language has its characteristics and reflects society to a great extent. Many studies have been carried out through the years. During the 1970's, vast sociolinguistic investigations were made and one

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focused mainly on syntactic, phonological and morphological variations. At first, gender was regarded as a sociolinguistic variable, just like social class, age, ethnicity and social status. It was not until the mid-70s when Robin Lakoff's essay *Language and Woman's Place* was released, science about gender and language was established (Lakoff, 1975). Even so, studies about gender and language were regarded as pure feminist research at the beginning. Why is that?

One researcher named Deborah Cameron has divided science in gender and language into three different categories: deficit, dominance and difference. She claims that all research in the referring area can be placed in one of three hypotheses. The hypotheses stand for different convictions regarding female's use of language and the reasons for possible differences between male's and female's way of expressing themselves. Women's submissive role in society is being reflected in language according to those who believe this to be the truth. When working with language one sometimes hears the expressions "female language" and "male language". Are females speaking in a special way in comparison with males or do the expressions, female and male language, refer to something else? Since society changes the use of language must certainly change too due to the fact that language reflects society. If differences are to be found, are they related specifically to gender or are we actually talking about status and power?

There is no doubt that differences between the language used by men and the language used by women have been extensively observed and that 'male and female conversational styles are quite distinct' (O'Loughlin, 2000:2), what has been less clear is what the reasons for these differences might be.

Language and Gender Theories

These works led to the 'dominance approach' that provides a traditional, negative evaluation of women's speech, which the authors contend is a direct consequence of women's political and cultural subordination to men. Thus, women's linguistic inadequacies are attributed to societal inequalities between men and women, where men's conversational dominance appears to reflect the wider political and cultural domination of men over women (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). Lakoff (1975) argues that women's manner of speaking, which is different to men, reflects their subordinate status in society. Thus, women's language is marked by powerlessness and tentativeness, expressed through the use of mitigators and inessential qualifiers, which effectively disqualifies women from positions of power and authority.

In particular, Lakoff (1975) argues that women's language style is deficient, lacking in authority and assertiveness. Lakoff (1975:43) also makes the interesting observation that women face a 'double bind' where they are criticized or scolded for not speaking like a lady but, at the same time, speaking like a lady systematically denies the female speaker access to power on the grounds that she is not capable of holding the ground based on her linguistic behavior (Ibid.).

Freeman & McElhinny (1996) divide Lakoff's (1975) ideas on women's language into three categories, the first which refers to the lack of resources that would enable women to express themselves strongly; secondly, language that encourages women to talk about trivial subjects and finally, language that requires women to speak tentatively. The authors also provide a comprehensive list of Lakoff's (1975) claims as provided below:

- Use of expletives while women use weaker ones
- Women's speech is more polite than men's
- Trivial, unimportant topics are considered to be women's domain
- Women use empty adjectives
- Women use tag questions more often than men
- Women express uncertainty through the use of the question intonation pattern
- Women tend to speak in 'italics' (women use more intensifiers)
- Hedges are used more often by woman
- Hyper – correct grammar is a feature of women's speech
- Women don't tell jokes (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996 : 232)

The above features have been critically studied empirically by other researchers to determine the accuracy of Lakoff's (1975) claims. This resulted in many of the claims being rebutted. Zimmermann & West (1975) who focused on male dominance in interaction added the feature of interruptions and silence to the list above. They argued that interruptions are used to silence others and that men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men (Ibid.). The study of interruptions also proved to be more complex than originally thought of by West & Zimmermann who argued that interruptions are "a device for exercising power and control in conversation"(1983:103) but as Tannen points out "to claim that a speaker interrupts another is an interpretive, not a descriptive act"(1989:268).

Women's way of speech is often connected with tentativeness and the reason for this might be their way of using hedges. These hedges are linguistic forms such as for instance I think, you know, I'm sure, sort of, perhaps. Lakoff appears to be rather convinced that women's speech contains more hedges than men's speech. She explains that it is because 'women are socialized to believe that asserting themselves strongly is not nice or ladylike, or even feminine' (Lakoff, 1975:54). Another researcher named Bent Preisler (1986) also claims that women use more hedges in their language. Coates gives a possible reason for men's lower usage of hedges and that is their choice of topics. She explains that men prefer to talk about impersonal subjects (Coates, 1993:116-118). Yet, another researcher named Janet Holmes has made a study concerning hedges. Her analysis proves that hedges are multi-functional. Hedges reflect the speaker's certainty as well as uncertainty in a conversation. Tag questions, such as I did- didn't I? He was- wasn't he? Etc. are also one of the linguistic forms that are connected with tentativeness according to Lakoff who claims that females use more tag questions than males.

As indicated earlier, the dominance approach to the study of gender is not without its limitations. The inherent problem with the difference approach is that the theory is almost based on men's dominant position in society, with women being portrayed as "weak, helpless victims of a patriarchy that forces them to act in weak, passive, irrational or ineffective ways" (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996: 236). In fact, dominance is seen to be in the same category as 'weakness', 'passivity' and 'deficiency' (Uchida, 1998:286), effectively portraying women as disempowered members of society. This can be seen as a distortion of reality, "depreciating the amount of power women have succeeded in winning and minimizes the chances of further resistance" (Jaggar, 1983:115). This theory is developed as a reaction primarily to Lakoff's (1975) deficit and dominance theories. In essence, researchers who subscribe to this theory claim that the reason for the different biological forms of language used by men and women is due to their early socialization. The key features of the difference or cultural difference approach relate to / psychological differences, socialization differences in social power.

An innate biological difference is cited by some as explanation of the differences in male/ female language. Under this theory, biological differences lead to different rates of language acquisition in addition to causing psychological differences (e.g. Buffery & Gray, 1972; McGlone, 1980). For example, women tend to place more value on making connections, seeking involvement, and concentrates on interdependencies between people (e.g. Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982; Boe, 1987). On the other hand, men value autonomy and detachment and seek independence, focusing on hierarchical relationships. Many, however, would attribute such differences to socialization rather than biology.

Another reason to explain differences in male/ female linguistic behaviour is that of social power. According to this view, men's greater degree of social power leads to their domination of interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Deuchar (1988) suggests that the powerless members of society must also be more polite. Thus in communities where women are the powerless members, their speech would contain more elements of linguistic politeness. Those who adhere to the difference/dual-cultural approach claim that men's conversational style is based on competitiveness while women have a more co-operative conversational style (Coates & Cameron, 1988). Coates (1986) argues that in her study the claims made by Maltz & Broker (1982) were borne out in the speech styles of her female subjects.

These women were found to have made characteristic use of gradual topic development, frequent and well placed minimal responses, which women tend to use more frequently than men (Hirschman, 1974; Fishman, 1980). Coates concluded that overlapping speech and linguistic forms that tone down what the speaker is saying are features of cooperative talk. Coates makes the further that women aim to maintain social relationships, thus their goal of consolidating friendships is reflected in how they talk.

Tannen's (1990) examination of a range of speech actions from advice-giving, story-telling, reactions to another's account of problems, asking for and giving information, compliments and gossip led her to conclude that while men approach the world as individuals in a hierarchical social order in which they are either one up or one down, women approach the world as individuals in a network of connections. Tannen further expanded on the 'dual- culture' model and argues that: Conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from other's attempt to put down and push them around (1990:24-25).

Essentially, theories of the difference/ dual-culture approach believe that differences appeared in childhood where boys and girls tend to play in sex-segregated groups with different sets of rules. Girls play almost exclusively in small, cooperative groups while boys play almost exclusively in larger, more hierarchically organized groups (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996: 240). Therefore, dual theories argue that gender differences are created in similar ways to regional and social differences in language use through physical and social separation (Rickford, 1996). There are inherent problems with the difference/ dual-cultural model as there were with the dominance model. The model ignores the interaction of race, class, age and sexual orientation with sex (Henley & Kramarae, 1991; Kramarae & Treichler, 1990). As Uchida says, "women and men belong to many interconnected social groups in addition to that of their own sex, and an individual is more than a 'woman' when interacting with others"(1998:285). In addition, the world of adults is different to that of boys and girls, thus the assumption that the same rules apply in these different contexts is simplistic.

Eckert & McConnell- Ginet (1992),(1995) and Henley & Kramarae (1991) find the difference approach lacking in that it does not consider power / dominance relations as a significant factor in understanding men's and women's interactional styles. For example, the 'dual-culture' model attributes breakdown in communication between men and women to cross-cultural misunderstandings rather than to men being more powerful than women. It appears to be a 'no-fault' linguistic model where the negative effects of communication are attributed to cross-cultural differences. Eckert & McConnell- Ginet (2003) identify further limitations of the difference/dominance paradigms. Firstly, the difference/dominance paradigms adopt extreme stances, where power and male dominance is emphasized in one while the other places emphasis on gender separation and difference. Secondly, adopting a single approach is too simplistic as this can cause omission of important details, thus distorting the overall picture. Finally, a focus on dominance does not take into consideration the importance of differences in experience and beliefs.

Social Constructivist Theory

Due to the limitations of the difference / dominance paradigms, it was felt that there was a need to rethink the theories of language and gender. Gradually the study of language began to move towards understanding gender as a constitutive factor in building social identities. Freeman & McElhinny view "language use as shaping understanding of the social world" (1996:219) and the role it plays in the relationships formed in the social world in addition to the construction of social identities (Davies & Harre, 1990; Fairclough, 1989; Ochs, 1993; Swann, 1993). Ochs (1993) makes the argument that it is only a small set of linguistic features that referentially index gender. In fact, Ochs (1993) further argues that because language is used dialogically, social identities are not so much created by language use as they are negotiated and constructed during the process of interaction. Cameron argues that: Linguists interested in analyzing the constitution of gender identities /gender relations need to look beyond lexical choice analyse who is represented as doing what, to who is and under what circumstances and with what consequences (1990 : 16).

Thus, the main principles of social constructivist gender theory are that gender is a social construct / construction which is performative in nature. These ideas were theorized by Goodwin (1998) and Eckert & McConnell – Ginnet (2003). Goodwin conducted an ethnographic study of language and gender in a single community and argues that rather than analyzing individual entities such as cultures / genders/ groups/ individuals, the basic unit of analysis should be the activity.

Therefore the debate about whether language should be studied as a separate, distinct entity , according to Freeman & McElhinny (1996), can be resolved if the notion of activity is adopted as it would allow for the understanding of language as constituting reality, reflecting modifications and development. Research now needs to move from identifying differences between men and women to instances where there are both similarities and differences in the speech of men and women. This would move research in the field of language use to understanding how and when language use constructs gender differences as a social category. Eckert & McConnell – Ginnet (1995) argue that gender constructs are embedded in other aspects of social life, for example significant categories like those involving class, race or ethnicity. This is an indication that the idea of gender polarization has now been discarded in favour of what has been termed by Butler (1993) as ‘gender as a performative, social construct’, a view subscribed to by other feminist researchers like Bergvall (1996), Freed (1996, 1999), Cameron (1995, 1996, 1997) and Sunderland (2004). The key to understand how gender is performed, is to look at one of tools used, namely that of discourse. Eckert & McConnell – Ginnet (1995) also state that ‘languages are the primary tool in constituting identities’. Similarly, Sunderland endorses the theoretical shift from ‘social learning’ to ‘social constructionism’ (2004:17). While the social constructivist theory of language and gender provides a much better framework for the study of gender than the difference\ dominance paradigms, Sunderland identifies a series of questions which still need to be answered , namely that of construction and its relationship to gender. In other words, what guarantees are there that the construction goes ‘beyond words spoken and written’ (2004:172).

Conclusion

Gender is not a fixed category, rather it is dynamic and is negotiated according to the event/activity/ context, thus males and females negotiate a continuum of femininity and masculinity which is determined by its linguistic marking and the role they have in a particular activity. Gender difference can never be an adequate explanatory end point for our analyses, because it is a social construction that needs studying in and of itself. Thus, in order to develop a politically productive approach which moves beyond an essentialist framework, we must ‘bracket’ or suspend our belief in the idea that gender is a dualistic category that exists prior to and outside talk, and explore the uncountable ways in which gender, and gender difference, are constructed, oriented to and used in language. In addition, researchers must pay more attention to other social variables which could be affecting their data, rather than automatically attributing every difference between male and female speech to gender differences.

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