

Language and Gender: Differences and Similarities

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Abstract

The relationship between gender and language has been studied with main focus on differences between the language of male and female from different angles with different methodologies. The research findings lay different emphasis on the differences, but there are some problems in the researches. This paper will review the previous researches into gender differences, then point out the problems existing in methodology and research findings, and finally propose that researchers should pay more attention to the similarities between the language of both genders, the similarities play the same important part as well as differences.

Keywords: language, gender, differences, similarities

1. Introduction

“Language and gender” refers to the relationship between the language of male and female. Gender difference is not only a reflection of the speeches between male and female, but also a reflection of their different living styles and attitudes. Gender difference is a popular research in many fields, such as in psychology, in sociolinguistics, and in female study. In these fields, the differences between male and female in many aspects have been studied from different angles with different methodologies. Though research findings lay different emphasis on the differences, there are still some similarities between them. For instance, males are more concerned with power, they desire to be leaders, while females are satisfied with their subordinate status; males speak directly and take transferring information as the first thing, but females speak indirectly, implicitly and mildly. For them, expressing feelings is very important. Many scholars have concerned about the differences between the language of male and female. To some extent, it shows that gender difference is very popular and important. This paper will focus on

gender differences and similarities. Firstly, the previous researches into gender differences are reviewed, then, some problems existing in research methodology and research findings are pointed out, and finally some suggestions are put forward that researchers should pay more attention to the similarities between the language of male and female, the similarities play the same important part as differences in research.

2. Review of the researches into gender and language

2.1. The Beginning of the research

Early in the 1970s, linguists, psychologists began to attach great importance to differences between the language of male and female, the representatives were Key, Lakoff and Thorne. The mainstream views include the deficit theory by Lakoff (1975), who considers that female language is inferior to male language, the dominance theory by Thorne(1975), who thinks female language is superior, male language is a kind of deficiency, and Cameron (2003) put forward that women are better at listening and sharing emotions with others. They put forward some terms, such as “women’s language” (Lakoff, 1973), “the female register” (Grosby and Nyquist, 1977), “genderlect” (Kramer, 1974) and “gender-related-language” (Mulac et al, 1986). The scholars use different terms to determine their research subject. No matter what angles they researched from and what methodology they used, the scholars promote the development of the research into gender differences.

The research into gender differences in the field of linguistics began with Robin Lakoff. She put forward “female language” and her book *Language and Women’s Place* published in 1973 aroused the linguists’ interests in this research topic. Lakoff points out several features of the female language in her book. (1) Specialized vocabulary. Compared with the language of

males, females often like to use more concrete color words, such as mauve, yellow, azure, beige and lavender. What's more, they prefer to some concrete words that have a close relationship with life. (2) Milder expletives. Females use expletives in a milder tone, but males often speak in a strong tone. For example, in *Friends*, Joe and Chandler often say "shit or damn it", while female actresses often use milder expletives, like "go to hell". The control of social conventions may lead to the different ways of speaking. (3) Empty adjectives. Females always use some adjectives, such as charming, divine, and cute to express their feelings. (4) Tag questions. Though males and females both use tag questions in a certain situation, females use tag questions specially, that is to say, when they express their opinions, tag questions are their favorite way of speaking even they are sure about what they want to say. Their purpose is to show they want to get recognized by others. (5) Intonation. Females prefer to a rising tone even in a declarative sentence, so their uncertainty and indecision have been revealed by a rising tone. (6) Superpolite forms. Females are more polite than males. They tend to prefer an indirect way of speaking. A case in point is "I was wondering whether it was possible for you to hand me that book?" (7) Hypercorrect grammar. Females usually speak in a formal manner not only in grammar, but also in pronunciation. They never use such words as "ain't", "goin". (8) Joke-telling and humor. The language of female lacks humor; they speak less humorously than males. Females inherently are not good at creating humor and understanding humor. For instance, we have known the famous classic and comic characters like Mr. Bean and Chaplin, but female comic characters can never be found to equate with them. The situation is the same in China, Zhao Benshan, Guo Degang and Zhou Libo has gained more popularity than any females.

Lakoff held that the differences in lexicon, syntax and pragmatics mentioned above give us a unique style of the language of female: obedient, uncertainty and passive. Their speaking style is determined by the requirements of the society for females and their subordinate social status.

2.2. Later study into this research topic

Lakoff's research has a great influence on the later linguists' research. In the field of linguistics, the differences between the language of both genders have been studied in Anthropology, Dialectology, and Sociolinguistics. In Jennifer Coates's view, the anthropologists regard language as a part of the social behavior of a certain social community. The dialectologists research into the changes of language and the decline of some dialects by analyzing the language of some community. Sociolinguists look gender as a social variable to study the relationship between language and gender. From their complicated understanding and researches, we can draw a conclusion that the researchers concerned about the differences between the languages of both genders in common.

In Anthropology, the researchers focus on differences in phonology and lexicon, etc. Flannery found the pronunciation of female is different from that of male to a great degree in the two tribes Montana and Gros Ventre. Males use /O/ at the place where females use / /.

In this language community, pronunciation is regarded as a sign of sex. So if males speak in the way of a female or females speak in the way of a male, he or she will be looked on as a bi-sexual. Edward Sapir described the language used in the tribe Yana in California. According to the following forms of dialogue: male-male, female-female, male-female, female-male, every one there may choose a proper form to communicate with others. For example, in the form of male-male dialogue, people follow such a kind of rule: if a word is a monosyllabic word or it is ended with a long vowel, diphthong, or a consonant, males often add a suffix /-◆→/ at the end of the word. Also

there are some researchers who pay more attention to the lexicon. Ide generalized these differences from the angle of Japanese. When the speaker refers to himself, males always use “ぼく”, while females use “わたし” or “あたし”. In fact, there are many researches into the differences in the field of anthropology.

Some dialectologists are very interested in the differences between the language of male and female within their native language. The look on males or

females as their research subject, and try to find differences between the language of both genders in a language community by questionnaire and field work, etc. It is disputed to choose males as subject or females. Those dialectologists who choose females as their subject, for example, Wartburg (1925) etc. believe that females are more conservative than males in the respect of language. The reason is that females almost have never left the place where they lived; females often stay at home and have a chat with her family members; they seldom have a chance to contact with strangers. Furthermore, females never serve in the army. So the dialectologists believe that females are their ideal research subject not only in studying dialects, but also in studying language and gender. But there are still some other dialectologists, like Orton (1962), etc. who hold that males always speak dialects more frequently and truly than females in fact. The language of male can reflect the characteristics of dialects. Although people usually believe that females are more conservative than males, however, the language of females is not conservative for that females can accept new vocabulary easily than males. And the dialectologists also think the true situation between the languages of both genders can be revealed if they limit their researches to a region in which the economy is not developed and people there are almost out of touch with the outside world. In this sense, it will become doubtful that whether their research findings lack of practicability and universality. That is because the dialectologists have not paid attention to the regions where the economy is developed and people usually have a contact with outside world.

In sociolinguistics, the researchers study the relationship between language and gender in many aspects, such as gender and politeness, gender and language style. Most of the researchers believe that females are more polite than males. The language of female is indirect and implicit; male's is direct to the contrary. Some scholars like Tannen even hold that males and females come from different culture and the communication between them should be transcultural communication. So if failure in communication appears, it is nothing to be surprised at. Gray believes that males come from Mars and females come from Venus. Since they come from different celestial, there must be some

differences between them. The sociolinguists put forward their hypothesis and proved them. It is worth mentioning that all the researches reflect that there is some prejudice against the language of female and their communicative style.

3. Shortcomings of the only attention to differences between the languages of both genders

All of the researches above only pay a great deal attention to the differences. The research findings are of great value, but there are still some shortcomings. They have ignored the similarities between the language of male and female.

Firstly, the scholars all hold that there are innate differences between the language of male and female. When they communicate, the differences between them still exist. So it is possible that their communication would be a failure due to the differences. That is because no matter who are males or females, they tend to pass judgement on the opposite side from their own way, thus lead to the prejudice and discrimination against each other.

Secondly, the researchers regard males and females as separate community respectively. So they overlook differences between individuals. In this way, they would simplify differences between the language of male and female. Therefore they could not reveal all the differences in full aspects.

Thirdly, this research topic should not be approached only from the angle of gender. We know all the communication happens in specific contexts. The contextual factors are indispensable for research into the relationship between language and gender, such as, what is the relationship between people, their communicative objective when they communicate with each other. Consequently, only depending on one variable "gender" must result in one-sided research findings, thus exaggerate the function of gender.

Finally, most of the scholars already have deep-rooted prejudice against gender. Usually they may give a negative evaluation on the language of female and their communicative style. This kind of prejudice must influence their explanation to the language materials. In this sense, the research findings must be lack of objectivity.

From the above analysis we can see shortcomings are obvious if the researches only follow differences between males and females. Similarities are also necessary in the research.

4. Close attention to similarities between the language of both genders

From the research on language and gender, it can be seen that some of the researches overemphasize the role of gender and fail to take into account context, variation and other factors. They focus on differences and overlook similarities. In order to have an overall and objective explanation to the relationship between males and females, similarities between them should be concerned about for the reason that similarities between them play the same important part.

Many scholars hold males and females come from different cultures, R. A. Borker and Tannen etc. have tried to probe the reasons for the language differences between male and female from the aspect of culture. They have conducted comprehensive researches on this topic based on social, cultural and psychological factors. In their research, they pointed out that males and females come from different cultural background; here “culture” refers to a sub-culture. These transcultural differences lead to the different characteristics of their language and behavior. And they think these cultural differences begin sprouting from childhood, form gradually, and maintain in the whole life. Besides the sub-culture of themselves, they still have their national culture, which make them belong to the same nation. Whether males or females, on one side, they form their values and way of behavior within their national culture; on the other side, they have their own values and way of behavior within their sub-culture. So their behavior, including language behavior must have differences and similarities. Generally speaking, the following aspects should be noticed in the research on this topic.

Firstly, researchers must take gender differences into account in all aspects, especially the differences between people’s personalities and their communicative styles because it is the differences between them that influence and determine their different way of using language, their living styles and their different views of life.

Secondly, researchers should place gender differences into specific contexts. Only in this way, can the research be more objective, deep and overall.

Thirdly, when beginning with research, researchers should abandon gender prejudice.

In summary, language is in a dynamically changing social context; it is not only influenced by the factor of gender, but also controlled by social, cultural, and psychological factors. Therefore, we should research on language and gender in an all-around view dynamically.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis above, we know the complicated relationship between gender and language. After reviewing the former researches into this topic, we can see the shortcomings, and the similarities between the language of male and female are as important as differences. It is very helpful for us to know all-round knowledge of gender and language in this field of sociolinguistics because language is an important communicative tool in human society and it evolves with the development of the society. Further research should take as many factors as possible into account and adopt comprehensive research methods, thus we can have an overall understanding of this social phenomenon--- language and gender.

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