

On the Trend of Convergence in Gender and Political Speech under the Perspective of Performance Theory

A Case Study on 2008 President Election Candidates of USA

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Abstract—The study of gender language is mainly concerned with how gender as a variable affects the ways people of different genders use language. In the past few decades, scholars have put forward deficit theory, difference theory and dominance theory, which opened a new era of gender language study. However, these theories regard gender differences in language as the inevitable. Consequently, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, and Bulter put forward the idea of social constructionist gender theory to argue that gender is a social construction implicated with other social identities in a multivariant way. This thesis intends to investigate gender and language in a dynamic process and selects data from the 2008 Presidential Election of United States. The study aims at examining language and gender from the angle of Performance Theory in the framework of stylistic analysis. And both quantitative and qualitative methods are applied. The thesis tries to explore whether trend of convergence in gender language does exist.

Keywords—gender language; performance theory; convergence; political speech

I. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics, first appeared in the 1960s in America, is the descriptive study of the effect of any and all aspects of society, it studies how language varieties differ between groups by certain social variables, e.g., ethnicity, religion, status, age, etc., among which, with the growth of sociolinguistics and the development of the feminist, “gender” has become an important variable. The study of gender and language shows how gender effect the ways of people of different genders use language, from the aspects of vocabularies, syntactical structures, tones and intonation, etc.

Most of the ongoing researches on language and gender focus more on the differences of the language used by people of different genders, or the troubles that those differences may bring about during cross-gender communication. However, the author believes that attentions should also be paid to the study of convergences in gender language.

The essay is a case study on the convergence of gender language, the author selected 5 participants of different

genders (3 male, 2 female). The 5 participants are the candidates (Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, John McCain and Sarah Palin) of 2008 Presidential Election of the United States, and the speeches they made during the Election are chosen as the study materials. And the reason of choosing political speech as research object is that the political material scripts on the same event is more accessible compared with other materials, besides, the politicians studied in the essay are basically of same ethnicity, religion, status and age. Thus, the research results are more convincing, considering other important variables are well-controlled.

In this essay, the author would employ stylistic analysis and take “phonetic features, vocabulary, syntactical structure and speech mechanism” (Lakoff, 1975) as criteria in analyzing data, and refined the criteria according to some other theories, e.g. Trudgill (1978) and his phonetic differences, Bolinger (1980) and his 6 characters of female language, etc. The author would adapt the software: *SPSS17.0* as analyzing instruments of data. The study aims to find out the possibility the convergence of male language and female language, thus do some help in efficient cross-gender communication and enhance the mutual understanding between male and female.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies on the trend of convergence and similarities in gender language started at a pretty late time and few breakthroughs have been made. Alice Freed (1996) pointed out that the differences between female language and male language should not be generalized. She believes that if the researchers put an eye on the social contexts of the conversations, it would be found the trend of convergence in cross-sex communications. The famous American psychologist Janet Hyde meta-analyzed the results of gender differences in her essay *Gender Similarities Hypothesis* (2005). It turns out that the similarities in language using between male and female are far more than their differences, and that the gaps between gender languages may be bridged with the changing of social

positions of male and female.

The author searched www.cnki.com for more domestic essays and dissertations in this field, and 4 Master's Dissertations and 4 Journal essays were found specifically on the convergence and similarities in gender language. Wang Yue (2008) studied the routine expressions used by college students and drew a conclusion that though the differences of gender language still exist in the speeches, the influence of the gender variable is quite limited, some other variables (cultural, social, psychological, etc) should also be taken into consideration. Dang Tingyun (2009) found out that the degree of convergence would change under the influence of certain factors by studying the corpus collected from cross-gender communications (speech quantity, tag questions, dodges, topic control, silence and interruption, etc). Meng Ying (2011) pointed out that there are no significant differences between male language and female language, that "gender" is only one of the variables in sociolinguistics.

III. FINDINGS

A. Semantic Convergence

There is "special feminine vocabulary in English that males may not, dare not and will not use". Basically, this "special feminine vocabulary" includes extravagant adjectives and intensifiers. The author studied the extravagant adjectives and intensifiers appeared in the seven speech scripts selected from the 2008 Presidential Election of the United States and analyzed the frequency to see if there are any significant differences in them.

1) Extravagant Adjectives

Extravagant adjective refers to those adjectives express more than what the fact is, e.g. cute, divine, gorgeous, etc. Females are believed tend to use more extravagant adjectives than males. Thus, the author studied the speeches from both male and female politicians on extravagant adjectives and counted out that altogether 46 times the extravagant adjectives were used in Hilary Clinton's and Sarah Palin's speeches. The number of that is 53 times in John McCain's, Barak Obama's and Joe Biden's speeches. Those extravagant adjectives include beautiful, crucial, luxury, extraordinary, remarkable, significant, etc.

E.g. 1

1) It drew strength from the not-so-young people who braved the bitter cold and scorching heat to knock on doors of perfect strangers ... (Barak Obama)

2) ..., I congratulate him on the victory he has won and the extraordinary race he has run. (Hilary Clinton)

3) Others talk about my excessive passion. (Joe Biden)
(See Appendix in detail)

The author employed Chi-Square Test by SPSS 17.0 in analyzing the statistics collected on extravagant adjectives and the following tables were drawn (see Table I):

TABLE I. ADJECTIVE

	observed value	expected values	residual
male	53	49.5	3.5
female	46	49.5	-3.5
total	99		

test statistics	
chi-square	.495 ^a
df	1
sig.	.482

a. 0 unit (.0%) has the expected frequency of less than 5. The minimum expected frequency unit is 49.5

From the tables above, it can be seen that there are no significant differences between male and female in terms of the use of extravagant adjectives (Sig> 0.05). The result indicates that the trend of convergence of gender language in political speeches does exist in the aspect of using extravagant adjectives.

2) Intensifier

Intensifier refers to the expression applied to make stress or emphasis in one's speech. Many words or phrases, e.g. very, quite, so, etc. belong to intensifier. Lakoff (1972) describes intensifier as "speaking in italics", which indicates that what intensifier to oral speeches is what italicized words to written articles. Previous studies hold that intensifier is one of distinctive features between female language and male language, that females tend to use intensifiers more frequently and widely to express their feelings. However, the author checked the speeches delivered by all five candidates and came up with an idea that in political field, male politicians and female politicians are in the equal position of using intensifier.

E.g. 2

1) My parents are here tonight, and I am so proud to be the daughter of Chuck and

Sally Heath. (Sarah Palin)

2) Thank you very, very much. Well, this isn't exactly the party I'd planned, but I sure like the company. (Hilary Clinton)

3) They deserve the tax breaks, not the super wealthy who are doing pretty well. (Joe Biden)

(See Appendix in detail)

The author employed Chi-Square Test by SPSS 17.0 in analyzing the statistics collected on intensifier and the following tables were drawn (see Table II):

From the tables below, it can be seen that the male politicians used 108 intensifiers in their speeches and female politicians used 113 intensifiers, that there are no

significant differences between male and female in terms of the use of intensifier (Sig> 0.05). The result indicates that the trend of convergence of gender language in political speeches does exist in the aspect of using intensifier.

TABLE II. INTENSIFIER

	observed value	expected values	residual
male	108	110.5	-2.5
female	113	110.5	2.5
total	221		

test statistics	
chi-square	.113 ^a
df	1
sig.	.737

a. 0 unit (.0%) has the expected frequency of less than 5. The minimum expected frequency unit is 11.3.

Traditionally speaking, females tend to use intensifiers more, hoping to be impressive in the conversations or in public, which reflects women's lack of confidence and sense of safeness. However, with the development of the society and the trend of feminism, females are gradually gaining equal position with males.

B. Grammatical Convergence

So far, there are not set grammatical structures used by females only. However, some material analyses indicate that females tend to use following structures more frequently: modulations, modalities, tag questions and sentences subjected with you or we. Besides, females are believed to be more grammatically-correct compared with males.

1) Modulation

Modulation, also known as hedge, refers to ambiguous clauses, e.g. I think, I suppose, etc. and hesitation fillers, e.g. well, you know, kind of, etc. which expresses uncertainty of the speakers. This usage implies the speaker to be very polite towards the listener, and is adapted in talking more frequently by females than males in expressing tentative requirements or suggestions.

E.g. 3

a) You know, I've been called a maverick; someone who marches to the beat of his own drum. (John McCain)

b) Well, I think we answered that one. (Hilary Clinton)

c) And to my campaign manager, David Plouffe, the unsung hero of this campaign, who built the best -- the best

political campaign, I think, in the history of the United States of America. (Barak Obama)

(See Appendix in detail)

The author employed Chi-Square Test by SPSS 17.0 in analyzing the statistics collected on modulation and the following tables were drawn (see Table III):

From the tables above, it can be seen that the male politicians used modulation structure for 51 times in their speeches and female politicians used for 53 times in their speeches. And there are no significant differences between male and female in terms of the use of modulation (Sig> 0.05). The result indicates that the trend of convergence of gender language in political speeches does exist in the aspect of using modulation.

TABLE III. MODULATION

	observed value	expected values	residual
male	51	52.0	-1.0
female	53	52.0	1.0
total	104		

test statistics	
chi-square	.038 ^a
df	1
sig.	.845

a. 0 unit (.0%) has the expected frequency of less than 5. The minimum expected frequency unit is 3.8.

TABLE IV. MODALITY

	observed value	expected values	residual
male	106	110.5	-4.5
female	115	110.5	4.5
total	221		

test statistics	
chi-square	.367 ^a
df	1
sig.	.545

a. 0 unit (.0%) has the expected frequency of less than 5. The minimum expected frequency unit is 36.7.

2) Modality

Modality expresses the degrees of definiteness of a speaker or a writer about a range of phenomena. And may also express a position about how probable or unusual something is when giving or asking information. Modality includes modal verbs, e.g. can, may, must, etc. and modal adverbs, e.g. probably, possibly, certainly, etc. Traditionally, males are believed to use less modal words than females.

TABLE V. SUBJECT

	observed value	expected values	residual
male	280	237.0	43.0
female	194	237.0	-43.0
total	474		

test statistics	
chi-square	15.603 ^a
df	1
sig.	.000

a. 0 unit (.0%) has the expected frequency of less than 5. The minimum expected frequency unit is 237.0.

E.g. 4

a) Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. (Barak Obama)

b) We'll probably have to slow that down. (Joe Biden)

c) With their usual certitude, they told us that all was lost - there was no hope for this candidate who said that he would rather lose an election than see his country lose a war. (Sarah Palin)

(See Appendix in detail)

The author employed Chi-Square Test by SPSS 17.0 in analyzing the statistics collected on modality and the following tables were drawn (see Table IV):

From the tables above, it can be seen that the male politicians used modality structure for 106 times in their speeches and female politicians used for 115 times in their speeches. And there are no significant differences between male and female in terms of the use of modulation ($\text{Sig} > 0.05$). The result indicates that the trend of convergence of gender language in political speeches does exist in the aspect of using modality.

3) Sentence Subject

In previous studies of gender language, females are found tend to take you or we as sentence subject more than males, showing their care towards the listeners. In this case study, the author noticed that compared to female

politicians, male politicians prefers to take it, they or I as sentence subject

The author employed Chi-Square Test by SPSS 17.0 in analyzing the statistics collected on sentence subject and the following tables were drawn (see Table V):

From the tables above, it can be seen that the male politicians used you or we as sentence subject for 194 times in their speeches and female politicians used for 280 times in their speeches. And there are significant difference between male and female in terms of the use you or we as sentence subject ($\text{Sig} < 0.05$). The result indicates that the trend of convergence of gender language in political speeches does exist in the aspect of choosing sentence subject.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to SPSS 17.0, there are no significant difference in extravagant adjective, intensifier, modulation and modality. There is significant difference in sentence subject chose by female politicians and male politicians. The results indicate that there is a trend of convergence in gender and political speech.

According to Performance theory by J. Butler(1990: 33), "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being", she believed that people are social actors or actresses, to be specific in this study, politicians are considered to be tough in mind and should be considerate to the citizens, thus the male politicians may choose some "women style" (Lakoff, 1972) to show their cares towards the listeners and female politicians may choose some strong words and structures to make themselves sound stronger so as to gain confidence from the voters. And the social construction of male and female politicians determines their languages and showed a trend of similarity and convergence in their languages.

Due to the limitation of time and effort, the study materials are quite limited, including limited participants and limited written materials. Besides, the author judged the materials all on her own, which may lead to some mistakes in judgment.

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