



LANGUAGE AND GENDER

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QUESTION 1:



WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT
LANGUAGE AND GENDER?
BRAINSTORM SOME IDEAS...



GENDER



- **Biologically constructed:** researchers used to think there was a male and a female brain with different structures, outputs and capabilities
- **Socially constructed:** each society or culture trains men and women to behave in a specific way (boys raised to be aggressive, girls passive)
- **Individually constructed:** each individual constructs his or her own perception of his or her own gender, and decided how to portray that to the world




INTRODUCTION

- From two perspectives: Ferdinand de Saussure – **langue** and **parole**
- **Langue**: language as a code, the words available to us
 - new coinages of words such as *Ms, chairperson, s/he*
- **Parole**: language in use, what people actually say or write
 - we can question whether women and men actually speak differently from each other
- **Discourse**: brings langue and parole together, it refers to what is said or written in relation to those aspects of the language which are available in the language



GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SPEECH

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- **Biological differences:**
voice – breathy voice interpreted as sexy/alluring in females
 - **Stereotypes:**
women's talk – chatty, gossipy, i.e. superficial and unimportant
men – strong, silent, i.e. a select and rare commodity
 - **Ideological relationship** between language use and gender
 - **Underlying prejudices** about the relative merit of men's and women's talk



STUDIES OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER

- The first main study: *Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Lakoff (1975): women forced to use language that “softened” or “weakened” their speech because of their **lower-status social position**
- **Women's speech** had to be more standard, softer, and more polite than men's to get things done
- Lakoff proposed the **dominance theory**: differences in speech related to gender are a result of men's socially superior position
- **Men**: greater use of interruptive behavior, fewer conversational support indicators, fewer mitigated directives, and more control over conversational topics
- **Women**: less success with the features above, the need to show more conversational responsiveness and to be less direct



STUDIES OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER

cont.

- Women use greater numbers of hedges, tag questions, and other indirect linguistic features – making their speech seem **weaker** and more **uncertain**
- Society teaches women to “**speak like a woman**”
- Lakoff’s book started a flood of research – it was suggested that her claims were either overstated or incorrect.
- Linguistic features themselves mean nothing – it is the context in which they are used – how their use is perceived is based on our **social preconceptions**
- After Lakoff’s book – a **paradigm shift** – focus from **biological sex** (being male or female at birth) to **gender** (the socialized process of becoming male or female)
- Research must focus more on **lifestyle patterns** and **environment** than on biology



ORIGINS OF GENDERED LANGUAGE USE

- Socialization into **gendered linguistic practice** begins at birth
- Babies were found to babble in different pitch ranges with mothers or fathers
- Children enter into **sex-segregated** activities, playgrounds, and sports
- This same-sex tendency help create **gendered patterns** in language use
- Differences then arise from socialization into different gender subcultures: this approach to male/female language differences is known as the **cross-cultural miscommunication approach**.
- **The dominance theory**: assumes an asymmetrical status between men and women – this asymmetry creates the differences in language
- **The cross-cultural miscommunication approach**: suggests that gender differences are similar to cross-cultural differences.




ORIGINS OF GENDERED LANGUAGE USE

cont.

- 1982, influential article by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker:
men: adopt a more competitive, hierarchical style
women: engage in a more cooperative, noncompetitive style
- **Males:** more directives, storytelling, and ritual insults to gain and hold the conversational floor
- **Females:** more mitigation, minimal responses, and support strategies to establish rapport and equality
- These differences can cause **miscommunication** that is similar to cultural misunderstanding
- Thus, problems in cross-gendered interaction can be blamed on **differences in gender subcultures**
- By being aware of the differences, we can be more sensitive to each other's styles and strategies.



CONTEMPORARY VIEWS AND RESEARCH

- The position of the cross-cultural miscommunication approach is hard to maintain
 - Its main **weakness** is that it fails to recognize that the linguistic choices of men and women are tied to a larger social and economic framework
 - **Contemporary research:** examines how linguistic choices are tied to the larger society in which we operate
 - **Gendered roles in the workplace:** women are positioned more in the standard language market (because of work: caregivers, educators, maids, hostesses and mothers)
 - More women enter traditionally male jobs: however, they will not use as many nonstandard features or taboo words as men because of **societal beliefs** about how women should talk
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SEXIST LANGUAGE

- ▶ Feminist linguists were concerned with what grammars and dictionaries **prescribed** (instead of described)
- ▶ *He* and *man* were **masculine generics** (e.g. *Man breastfeeds his young.*)
- ▶ Other **problematic generics**: *chairman*, *spokesman* (they referred to women as well)
- ▶ **Male firstness** as in “*he or she*”
- ▶ **Female diminutives** such as *usherette*
- ▶ **Gender marking** such as *lady doctor*
- ▶ *Mr* as an **honorific** for men (does not indicate his marital status)
- ▶ *Mrs* or *Miss* (indicates marital status)
- ▶ **Derogatory** lexis such as *a blonde* (used of women but rarely of men)
- ▶ **Overlexicalization**: the excessive number of derogatory terms to describe sexually active or elderly women
- ▶ Underlying these concerns was a belief that language **not only reflected** but also **shaped** thought and social action



CLASSROOM INTERACTION

▶ TEACHER TALK

- ▶ Studies have found that teachers tend to **talk** far **more** to the **male** students
- ▶ This phenomenon found to be **widespread** across all subjects in the curriculum
- ▶ However, it's **not intentional**, but rather unrecognized process
- ▶ Other studies (meta-analysis – Kelly, 1988):
 - boys being given **longer to answer** a question (mathematics)
 - girls being asked **challenging and open questions** less often than boys
- ▶ In **conclusion**: boys get more high-level questions, more academic criticism, and slightly more praise than girls



CLASSROOM INTERACTION cont.




STUDENT TALK



In mixed-sex classrooms:

- boys **talking** more than girls
- boys **interrupt** both girls and other boys more than girls interrupt each other



Though disruptive, boys' talk may develop their **self-confidence** to seize and hold the floor, to control topics, and in general prepare them for the skills of competitive, public speaking




Gender may intersect with **ethnicity**:

- **black boys** approach teachers less often than most girls
- **white males** challenge statements of fact
- **black males** challenge application of rules




LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER

- **HOW LANGUAGE IS USED TO TALK ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN**
 - Vocabulary: brainstorm **insult terms** that are used **for men only**, insult terms that are used **for women only**, and insult terms that are used **for both men and women**
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LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.


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- **Vocabulary:** insult terms
 - men: insults attack intellectual capability, physical strength and masculinity
 - women: insults attack sexuality
 - both: insults are fairly generic
 - **Symmetry and Asymmetry:**
 - symmetry: terms used to represent males get equal usage and scope of use as terms used to represent females
 - asymmetry: terms used to represent males and females DO NOT get equal usage and scope of use
 - symmetry: e.g. horse (adult generic), stallion (adult male), mare (adult female)
 - asymmetry: e.g. human (adult generic), man (adult male and human generic), woman (adult female)

LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

- **Titles:** men – Mr., women – Miss, Mrs., Ms. (one title for men, three for women), generic: Dr., Judge, President
- **Unmarked and marked terms:**
 - unmarked: terms **without** specific endings used for males or females
 - marked: terms **with** specific endings for males and only females
 - waiter (unmarked – male or female), waitress (marked – only female)
 - women are choosing nowadays unmarked versions (e.g. waiter, actor)
- **Semantic derogation:** a word that is normally positive takes on a negative connotation in specific situations (especially for women)
 - e.g. gentleman/lady – e.g. cleaning lady (lower status), lady of the night (prostitute); bachelor/spinster – e.g. spinster is old, not beautiful (bachelorrete)



LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

- ▶ **Grammar:** human beings in general – he, she, or combination?
 - the third person singular problem
 - ▶ **Discourse:** we can see discourse about men and women in TV advertisements and internet-based advertisement
 - spoken/written
 - multimodal
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LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

➤ HOW MEN AND WOMEN USE LANGUAGE

- A lot of research is inconclusive
- **Verbosity:** who speaks more? Depends on the context, closely linked to power dynamics
- **Turn-Taking and Interrupting:** depends on the situation, personality plays a role
- **Back Channel Support** (active listening strategies, eye contact, posture, facial support):
 - *Really? Wow, that's interesting!, I didn't know that.*
 - asking open-ended questions, interested facial expressions, forward leaning posture
 - slightly more use of back channel support by women



LANGUAGE USE AND GENDER cont.

➤ HOW MEN AND WOMEN USE LANGUAGE

- **Mitigating:** strategies and words that we use in order to decrease the power of what we're saying
 - hedging: hesitation (sort of, kind of, um)
 - epistemic modals: reducing forcefulness (should, could, may)
 - other mitigators (possibly, probably)
 - results are mixed, less power = more mitigation
- **Rising intonation:** adds a questioning tone, or degree of uncertainty to a statement
 - "I'm going out tonight." – certain
 - "I'm going out tonight?" – uncertain
 - women use it frequently, especially teenage females
- **Content:**
 - women talk more about people, emotions, internal processes and thought processes
 - men talk more about external events and conversation topics typically associated with men, such as sports