

Language and Gender

First, some claims

- 1) Men **interrupt** women more than vice versa.
- 2) Women are more **communicative** than men.
- 3) Men do **not give verbal recognition** of the contributions in the conversation made by women.
- 4) Men **curse** more than women.
- 5) Women **gossip** more than men.
- 6) Women **talk more with one another** than men do.
- 7) Men **speak more comfortably in public** than women.

Two subtopics

Topic 1: The representation of gender in language

Topic 2: The conversational characteristics of men and women

Gender and sex

Sex: a biological condition, i.e. defined as a set of physical characteristics

Gender: a social construct (within the fields of cultural and gender studies, and the social sciences)

"Today a return to separate single-sex schools may hasten the revival of separate gender roles"

— Wendy Kaminer, in The Atlantic Monthly (1998)

General usage of the term gender began in the late 1960s and 1970s, increasingly appearing in the professional literature of the social sciences. The term helps in distinguishing those aspects of life that were more easily attributed or understood to be of social rather than biological origin (see e.g., Unger & Crawford, 1992).

Linguistic origins of *Gender*

- ➡ According to Aristotle, the Greek philosopher Protagoras used the terms **masculine, feminine, and neuter** to classify nouns, introducing the concept of grammatical gender.
- ➡ Gender as a **grammatical category**

Many languages specify Gender (and gender agreement)

(1) *Greek*

o andras
the.masc. man

i gyneka
the.fem. woman

to pedhi
the.ntr. child

(2) *German*

der man
the.masc. man

die Frau
the.fem. woman

das Kind
the.ntr. child

(3) *French*

l(e) homme
the.masc. man

la femme
the.fem. woman

☞ **Indoeuropean** had gender distinction; Swahili has 16 gender distinctions

And many others don't!

E.g. English, Austronesian languages

But gender appears on pronouns:

(1) **He** left.

(2) **She** left.

(3) **It** left. (what types of things does “it” refer to?)

Gender correlates with other perceptual (and possibly grammatical) categories like **humaness**, **agentivity**, and **animacy**.

(4) **The boy** broke the vase. **It** was naughty.

(5) **Das Mädchen** hat den Vase gebrochen.

{Sie/Es} war unanständig.

Does gender influence our perception of categories?

Some may think that it does!

☞ Boroditsky, Schmit, and Phillips (2002):
German versus Spanish gender
oosative versus *soupative* distinction in Gumpuzi

The question must be understood within the context of whether **language influences thought** (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis)

The Whorfian Hypothesis

“We dissect nature along lines laid by our own language. [...] the world is presented as a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—an this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds.”

(Benjamin Lee Whorf, 1956: *Language, Thought, and Reality*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.)

Back to gender

The Awful German Language, by Mark Twain

“Surely there is not another language that is so slipshod and systemless, and so slippery and elusive to the grasp. [..] To continue with the German genders: a tree is male, its buds are female, its leaves are neuter; horses are sexless, dogs are male, cats are female -- tomcats included, of course; a person's mouth, neck, bosom, elbows, fingers, nails, feet, and body are of the male sex, and his head is male or neuter according to the word selected to signify it, and not according to the sex of the individual who wears it -- for in Germany all the women have either male heads or sexless ones; a person's nose, lips, shoulders, breast, hands, and toes are of the female sex; and his hair, ears, eyes, chin, legs, knees, heart, and conscience haven't any sex at all. The inventor of the language probably got what he knew about a conscience from hearsay.”

| Mark Twain, *continued*

“In the German it is true that by some oversight of the inventor of the language, a Woman is a female; but a Wife (Weib) is not -- which is unfortunate. A Wife, here, has no sex; she is neuter; so, according to the grammar, a fish is he, his scales are she, but a fishwife is neither. To describe a wife as sexless may be called under-description; that is bad enough, but over-description is surely worse. A German speaks of an Englishman as the Engländer to change the sex, he adds inn, and that stands for Englishwoman -- Engländerinn. That seems descriptive enough, but still it is not exact enough for a German; so he precedes the word with that article which indicates that the creature to follow is feminine, and writes it down thus: "die Engländerinn," -- which means "the she-Englishwoman." I consider that that person is over-described.”

Greek

(1) o helios
the sun (masc)

i selene
the moon (fem)

German

(2) die Sonne
the sun (fem)

der Mond
the moon (masc)

Question: Should the contrast be taken to suggest that the German and Greek **perceive the moon and the sun differently?**

Answer: Not really! It seems more reasonable to believe that **human conceptual structure remains constant** in its core features across languages.

Do gender and sex differences affect the way people engage in conversation?

☺ The answer to this question is positive! It has to do with the way we **use language in communication**.

Bact to our earlier claims:

- Men interrupt women more than vice versa.
- Women are more communicative.
- Men do not give verbal recognition of the contributions in the conversation made by women.
- Men curse more than women.
- Women gossip more than men.
- Women talk more with one another than men do.
- Men speak more comfortably in public than women

Some History

Language was a particular feature and target of **Women's feminist movements in the '60s and '70s.**

“The very semantics of the language reflects [women's] condition. We do not even have our own names, but bear that of the father until we exchange it for that of a husband.”

(Robin Morgan (1977: 106), *Going Too Far*)

Claim: **Language is sexist!**

Examples

☞ chairman, spokesman, barman, generic *he*

More sexist elements in language that are not that innocent

- (1) a He is a **master** of the intricacies of academic politics.
b ☹️ She is a **mistress** of the intricacies....

- (2) a He is a professional.
b She is a professional.

☞ Sexual connotations in both cases

- (3) a Mary hopes to meet an eligible **bachelor**.
b ☹️ Bill hopes to meet an eligible **spinster**.

Robin Lakoff: *Language and the Woman's Place* (1975)

- ☞ Sexist language
- ☞ Shift to **gender differences in discourse**

Dale Spender, 1980: *Man Made Language*. (UK)

- ☞ Differences in conversational styles actually turn out to **disadvantage women**, contributing to women being effectively silenced.

This is the hightime of the feminist movement!

Robin Lakoff: *Language and the Woman's Place* (1975)

“Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. Woman's language has its foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are preempted by men.”

Some Characteristics of Women's Talk

Marry Haas, 1944: Men's and Women's speech in Koasati, *Language* 20.

In Koasati, a Muskogean language, men and women's speech have different phonological and morphological features.

English is different.

According to Lakoff, women's **talk** has the following properties:

- 1) A large set of words **specific to their interests**: e.g. color words like magenta, shirr, dart (in sewing), etc.
- 2) “Empty” adjectives such as **divine, precious, lovely, cute**, etc.
- 3) **Tag questions and rising intonation** in statement contexts:
What's your name dear? Mary Smith?
- 4) Use of **hedges**
- 5) Use of intensive “**so**”
- 6) **Hypercorrect grammar**: women are not supposed to talk roughly
- 7) **Super-politeness**
- 8) Ask more questions

 Goal of politeness: oppression!

Womens' talk is a cultural product

Deborah Tannen, 1990. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*

- 👉 Women speak a language of connection and intimacy
- 👉 Men speak a language of status and independence

Thus:

- 👉 Their communication can be like cross-cultural communication.

Background: interethnic communication

“Problems between people of different ethnic groups are the result of differences in systems of conversational inference, and the cues for signalling speech acts and speaker intent.”

(Gumperz, 1978: *The conversational analysis of interethnic communication*)

See also Maltz and Borker 1982

Premise: Women and men live in different worlds

☹ And **segregation starts early!** Boys and girls grow up largely in one-sex groups.

Maltz and Borker, 1982: A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication. In *Language and Social Identity*, Cambridge University Press.

☞ **Boys:**

- Tend to play in **large groups** that are **hierarchically structured**
- Their group has a **leader**
- **Status** is negotiated via **orders**, or telling jokes/stories
- Games have **winners and losers**
- **Boast** about skills, size, ability

☞ **Girls:**

- Tend to play in **small groups or in pairs**
- The **center** of a girl's social life is **a best friend**
- Within the group, **intimacy** is the key
- **Differentiation** is measured not by status, but **by relative closeness**
- Many of their **activities do not have winners and losers** (e.g. in hopscotch or jump rope, everyone gets a turn).
- **Girls are not expected to boast** (in fact they are encouraged to be humble), or give orders (they would be *bossy*)

☞ **Girls do not focus on status** in an obvious way. They just want to **be liked**.

Fights over pickles! (Sheldon 1990: Gendered talk in preschool disputes). Mother-children play (Goodwin)

Community of Practice

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: *Communities of Practice: where language, gender, and power all live.*

☞ A CoP entails **shared practices** (linguistic and otherwise), it thus extends the notion of “speech community”

- Practices have implications for identity
- People ascribe properties to others because of class membership.
- CoF **shapes and reinforces gender**

Examples of CoPs: family, a sportsteam, a creative writing class

Fact: Men are problem solvers

Comment on living with an autistic child:

Mother: The real sufferer is the child.

Father: Life is problem solving. This is just one more problem to solve.

Problem talk:

For a woman: a bid for an expression of understanding

For a man: a request to solve the problem

Myth: Women talk more than men

Some folk “wisdom”:

- (1) Foxes are all tail, and women are all tongue.
- (2) A woman’s tongue wags like a lamb’s tail.
- (3) The North sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman be at a loss for a word.

However:

☞ Research found that men talk more often (Eakins and Eakins): **men’s turns 10.66 secs, women’s 3-10 secs** at faculty meetings

☞ At academic conferences (Swacker): women 40.7% of the presentations, 40% of audience. But only 27.2% asked questions.

There seems to be an asymmetry between private and public speaking—Tannen's *rapport* versus *report* talk

Claims:

- For women, the language of conversation is for *rapport*: a way to establish connections and negotiate relationships.
- For men, it is a way to negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical order.

Question:

But then, what is the basis for the impression that women talk more than men?

Myth: Women don't tell jokes

Consider how many female American comedians you know.

👉 **Culture** plays an important role in allowing women to express their humor. Certain ethnic backgrounds allow it more than others.

Gossip

Telling details of **other's lives** and telling one's friends details about **own's life**

Gossip is about:

- Informing
- Share secrets
- Promote closeness

Gossip is also a form of **social control**

Greek laments

(Caraveli, Anna. 1986: *The bitter wounding. The lament as a social protest in rural Greece.*)

- Women recite laments in the company of other women only.
- Women judge the skill in this folk art by the ability to move others.
- Bonding in pain (compare to “troubles” talk)

Again, the motivating force appears to be **closeness, not status.**

But surely men talk to their friends too!

And here are the topics:

- Work
- Sports
- Institutional power
- Politics
- Not so much about family

Personal issues are not expected to feature prominently in the conversation

Dealing with Conflict

Tannen's claim:

Men are more confrontational than women.

Preschool doctor-patient play (Sachs, Anderson, and others):

- Boys wanted to be the doctors.
- Girls were more flexible. Used more "Let's", or made joint proposals (I'll be the nurse and you be the doctor).

In school, girls appear:

- More refined (polite) than boys in their social interactions
- More willing to consider the other's point of view
- More willing to be assigned roles in a team.
- Less competitive

☞ Does this pattern predict that girls will be less confrontational than boys?

☞ Does it predict that boys are better prepared for success?

Just like most of what I said so far:

These patterns are generalizations that can make us expect certain tendencies, but can strictly speaking make prediction!

Interrupting

Tannen's anecdote:

A woman sues her husband for divorce. When the judge asks her why she wants a divorce, she explains that her husband hasn't talked to her in two years. The judge asks her husband: "Why haven't you spoken to your wife in two years?" He replies: "I didn't want to interrupt her."

The study of interrupting is important because it carries a load of **meta-messages**:

- That one doesn't listen
- That one doesn't care enough to listen
- A sense of worthlessness
- A sense of dominance and control

Interruptions with or without **overlap**

Interrupting and cultural differences

☞ Languages differ wrt **engagement expectations**

- In some cultures, overlap is highly regarded as a token of engagement and interest
- In some other cultures it is considered rude

Examples

- Hawaii: children jointly joke and engage in “talk story”.
- More simultaneous speech among Japanese speakers than among Americans.

Conclusions

- 1) The question of whether men and women as groups have different conversational styles must be considered in the context of cross-cultural communication.
- 2) In this context, there are indeed patterns that can be used as the basis for comparison.
- 3) There are always exceptions!

Question for Thursday

Think of one case in which, in your experience, men and women (or boys and girls) talk differently. Describe the differences, while also listing possible contextual factors that may be relevant. If a feature changed in the context, would the difference(s) still obtain?