

# Language matters

A guide to everyday questions about language

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## Preface

I've been teaching linguistics since 1973. Newspaper and magazine reporters approach me in that role with questions—ranging all over the board—that often reveal misconceptions about language. We use language in most of our daily interactions with other people, so the types of questions that can arise are at least as varied as the types of situations in which we use language. Here are some examples:

How can we stop our children from using bad grammar?

Why don't we reform English spelling so that the words will be spelled exactly as we all say them?

Isn't it interesting that the Inuit have dozens of words for snow when Americans can't even imagine all those different varieties?

The first question is problematic because the whole notion of good versus bad grammar is problematic. How do we decide whose grammar is good and whose is not? Language changes from one generation to the next, no matter what, and change is simply that—neither improvement nor decline; it is merely change. The second question is based on the assumption that we all pronounce words in the same way. Even within the United States that is false, but certainly, when we look at Canada, England, India, Australia, and other countries where English is one of the national languages, the

Pidgins and creoles. <http://babel.uoregon.edu/romance/t1407/creole/creole.html>, <http://logos.uoregon.edu/explore/socioling/pidgin.html>, <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~sngynan/discuss3.html>, and <http://www.anthro.mnsu.edu/cultural/language/pidgcreol.html>

Post-contact languages of western Australia. [http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVLPages/AborigPages/LANG/WA/4\\_7.htm](http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVLPages/AborigPages/LANG/WA/4_7.htm)

Tok Pisin: The national language of Papua New Guinea. <http://www.siu.edu/departments/cola/ling/reports/Erepa/>

Words & stuff: cc: pidgin carriers. <http://www.kith.org/logos/words/upper2/CCCreole.html>

## Do men and women talk differently? And who cares?

In earlier chapters, I discussed three important factors that influence language change: the fact that people don't all hear the same (chapter 7), the fact that people don't all repeat in the same way (also chapter 7), and contact among different languages (chapter 8). But even if there were a linguistic community in which people actually did all hear and repeat language in the same way and even if that community were monolingual and totally isolated from other linguistic communities, its language would change over time because other factors influence language change, factors internal to a society. In this chapter we'll look at the interaction of gender roles and language, but first let's briefly face a larger question.

Why do social factors bring about language change? There are many theories, but they tend to boil down to one basic concept. Imagine that we live in a society in which everyone dresses the same. How long do you think this will continue? Not too long—someone is going to shorten a hem, roll up a T-shirt sleeve (carrying a little pad of Post-its in the newly created pocket), use a shawl as a festive skirt, or keep wearing jeans long after the threadbare stage. Even if most of us ignore the change, some might copy it, and sometimes most of us will copy it. If enough of us do so, of course, it's no longer a daring thing to do. It becomes the new status quo, and then we wait for another iconoclast.

People experiment with language and thus bring about language change, just as they experiment with hemlines and bring

about style change. The interesting difference, however, is that language does not change in arbitrary ways but rather in ways that conform to general principles. As native speakers of our language, we do not have a conscious and explicit knowledge of these principles, just as we don't have an explicit knowledge of the process of metabolism of sugar (except for the chemists among us). Nevertheless, we adhere to those principles, and if our pancreas is healthy, we metabolize sugar.

What are these principles? Let me give a small example. Several years ago, it was popular among young people to say a sentence and then put a negative at the end, a kind of sarcasm. For example, if you had asked your teenage son what he was going to do after dinner on a Friday night, he might have said, "I'm going to be studying for hours . . . not." This usage was widespread, and I wondered at a certain point if it might actually become part of American English sentence structure. Putting a marker (like "not") at the beginning or end of an utterance that the marker relates to (or, as linguists and philosophers would say, "operates over") is common in language. Some Chinese questions can be structurally identical to statements, for example, the only difference being the presence of a question marker (*ma*) at the end. Thus the English negative structure was not in violation of any general linguistic principles. It did not, in fact, last long, but the point is that it could have.

On the other hand, if someone had ever tried to introduce a negative structure such as "I am not going not not to be not not not studying not not not for hours," it would never have had a chance of catching on. What I did here was to add after the verb form the number of "not's" that corresponded to its position in the sentence. So the first verb form, "am," had one "not" after it. The second, "going," had two, and so on. Why is this structure so strange from a linguistic point of view? It seems that language principles

do not allow counting linguistic units beyond three at most, whether in the sound system, the word formation system, the sentence structure system, or the meaning system. We are hard-wired not to do it. (Most of the chapters in part I should convince you that it makes sense to talk about being hard-wired for language.)

Let's return to our linguistically isolated and homogeneously monolingual community. Someone introduces a language change that does adhere to general linguistic principles. Which potential changes actually endure and become the new status quo? It is impossible to predict. Languages often look as if they are heading in a certain linguistic direction and then change course. No reputable linguist will predict language change.

Still, we know that certain factors are important in language change within a linguistic community: race, ethnicity, social class, educational background, age, and gender, among others. Much has been written about these factors (and others), but that material is usually aimed at linguistic scholars. An exception is gender: Quite a lot has been written for the general public about the male and female use of language, particularly conversational behavior. The question of whether men and women talk differently is at least as important to the general public as any other question about gender roles, and it is arguably more important because language is such an intrinsic part of our identities.

The first step in answering that question is simply to collect data. But unless the data collection is designed to test specific hypotheses, the crucial evidence that would distinguish between competing hypotheses is often missing, so varying conclusions can be consistent with a single set of data. Furthermore, sometimes data collection is not done in a scientific manner but rather anecdotally. Anecdotes may, in fact, reveal important truths, but to be convinced of that, we need wide-ranging data that have been collected

with the most scrupulously scientific methodology. We should keep this in mind as we proceed.

Some scholars have claimed that women and men in the United States talk differently in several ways. Let's consider six common and representative claims that I have come across in the literature:

1. Men interrupt women more than vice versa.
2. Men ignore the topics that women initiate in conversation.
3. Men do not give verbal recognition of the contributions women make to conversation.
4. Men use more curse words and coarse language than women.
5. Men use more nonstandard forms (such as "ain't") than women.
6. Men are more innovative, accepting language change more readily than women.

Students are often familiar with claims 1 through 4—or, if not familiar, tend to find them probable—but they may never have thought about the other claims and have no idea of whether or not they are probable. Claims 1 through 4 concern conversational behavior that the ordinary person is sensitized to. Many of us were taught as children that some of the behavior attributed to males in claims 1 through 4 is rude and shouldn't be done. Claims 5 and 6, on the other hand, concern conversational behavior that linguists are more likely to notice than the ordinary public. I include them because they are among the most important for anyone who cares about language change.

Consider the first three claims. How do they differ from the next three? That is, what aspect(s) of language are the first three claims about and what aspect(s) of language are the second three claims about? The first three involve interactive behavior in a

conversation, whereas the last three involve individuals' speech patterns.

Try to imagine a conversation with someone who (1) interrupted you, (2) did not pay attention to the topics you introduced into the conversation, and (3) did not acknowledge your contributions to the conversation. Have you ever been in such conversations? Why did you stay in the conversation, if, in fact, you did? You may have stayed because the other person had some societal position of authority, perhaps your boss, your doctor, or your teacher. In that case, leaving might have had adverse consequences.

Indeed, the first three claims about men's versus women's speech have been challenged on the grounds that, in single-sex conversations, if one person has more power than the other person, these same characteristics of conversational behavior are found. In other words, the first three claims are, according to some scholars, really about power differences, not about sex differences—an example of why data collection needs to take into account a range of possible (and sensible) hypotheses. If your data on conversational behavior involves only mixed-sex conversations, you cannot know whether the characteristics you find follow from the sex differences or from other possible differences in conversation partners—other possible differences might manifest themselves in somewhat complex ways.

Here's an example of real conversation (recorded by one of my students in a class on oral and written language in the fall of 2001). The two speakers are discussing a novel.

N: It was funny.

T: It was really descriptive.

N: It was funny how um the cat switched bowls. He uh fell into the bowl and breathed in the milk into his ear. It was . . .

T: I liked that one.

N: Yeah.

T interrupted N and also ignored the topic of humor until N repeated and elaborated on it. These two speakers are middle school boys. They are the same age, and the conversation is taking place at T's house, which might give T an advantage; on the other hand, N is the guest, which might give him an advantage. T exhibits more male conversational behavior than N does, according to claims 1–3. But even in this snippet of conversation we can recognize that the language interaction is complex. When T ignored what N said about humor, N ignored what T said about descriptiveness. They both wanted to put forth their ideas but were ready to acknowledge the other when forced. Is this typical of same-sex conversations?

Here's another example (recorded by another student in that class):

J: Um, how was your camp?

S: It was good.

J: What did you do?

S: Um, lots of stuff. I did a basketball clinic. That was fun.

J: Yeah. Um.

S: What was your favorite part?

J: Um, I think everything was my favorite part.

S: What was your specific . . .

J: Did you do a lot of crafts?

S: Not too many. I made a mask.

J interrupts S and ignores S's unfinished but predictable question. These two speakers are sisters; J is nine and S is fifteen. J exhibits more male conversational behavior than S does, according to claims

1–3. Given the age difference, we might be surprised that J seems to behave like the more powerful of the two. But if you consider the dynamics of the conversation, S seems solicitous of J—just as a big sister might be when a six-year gap is involved. It is important to notice that this same-sex conversation is quite distinct in participant interaction from the preceding one.

These are just two examples, although my classes over the years have collected hundreds. Almost all of them present interesting complications for claims 1–3, suggesting that factors beyond gender are relevant—perhaps age, familial relationships, location of the conversation, and so on.

The last three claims, although about individuals' speech, still present tricky questions for the researcher. Consider number 4: Do the social relationships of the two members of a conversation affect the degree to which they curse? For example, if they are teenage siblings, the girl is older than the boy, and there is cursing, does the male still curse more than the female? Not in some of the conversations I've witnessed. If there's one adult male with three adult females in an office, one of the females is the boss of all the other people, and there is cursing, does the male still curse more than any of the females?

Even if we disregard the societal relationships of the people and consider only gender, some questions arise: Are women more likely to curse with other women than with men? Are men more likely to curse with other men than with women?

As far as I can tell, claims 4 and 5 are well documented, but exactly what they tell us about men versus women is unclear. The prevalence of coarse language among men (claim 4) is surely not evidence of any structural difference between the ways in which men and women talk or of any difference in brain structure between the two sexes. Rather, this difference most probably follows from

expectations about the levels of politeness that men and women are expected to maintain in conversation. In other words, the difference is sociological and culture-bound, not physiological. The prevalence of nonstandard forms among men (claim 5) is also probably a purely sociological fact, in that nonstandard forms are more likely to be taken as less refined; women in our society are traditionally expected to speak in a more refined manner than men.

On the other hand, claim 6 is simply wrong. Women often apply new sound rules of certain types more aggressively than men, whereas men are more aggressive in applying new sound rules of other types. It appears that women's speech has a greater orientation toward prestige norms than men's speech does. In other words, women, more readily than men, adopt innovations that are considered to be high class or smart, using language to try to get ahead economically and socially.

All six claims, then, are more about sociological factors than linguistic ones. It is important, for example, that women do not always use certain tenses on verbs, have a different set of word stress rules than men, or always place a preposition as the second word of their utterances. These are hypothetical examples of the types of differences that could conceivably come up if men and women really had different linguistic systems—but such hypotheticals never do come up in English. The grammar (i.e., the linguistic description) of women's speech in English is identical, as far as I know, to the grammar of men's speech.

This is not to say that we don't associate certain grammatical patterns with gender, but gender roles are not the same as one's sex. For example, consider vocabulary use. "Lovely" or "divine" might be seen as feminine language. A more feminine man might easily use these words, however, whereas a more masculine woman might not. So, again, these differences are related to societal roles, not to

sex. We cannot claim that the grammar of women's speech is different from that of men's.

The preceding example of vocabulary choice relates to the United States. In various other countries, examples of differences between what men and women say can come from other parts of the grammar. In Japanese, for example, there is a usage called the *o-honorific* that textbooks tell us only women say. This is not true, however. Feminine men, particularly gay men, sometimes use this form. So, again, the linguistic difference is one of sociological gender roles, not physiological sex.

The question of whether physiological sex is ever the true factor in speech differences between men and women needs to be approached carefully. It is impossible to learn whether sex or sociological role is the distinctive characteristic for a certain linguistic usage in societies that do not tolerate overt gender role crossing and in which the power of men over women is stable regardless of situation. Therefore, the place to look is in other societies, like that of the United States, in which gender role crossing is tolerated and/or in which men can have power over women and vice versa, depending on the situation.

If you'd want to undertake a systematic study of a particular language phenomenon, with an eye toward whether physiological sex, gender roles, or power relationships are pertinent in its analysis, you have to control for as many of the potentially relevant factors as you can. For example, let's say that you observe a situation in which a man and a woman exhibit distinct linguistic behavior regarding the use of a given word X. Let's also say that the man in the situation was traditionally masculine and the woman was traditionally feminine. I'm going to call this pair a. You can then search for other instances of that (type of) situation, in which you find the following:

- b. Two traditionally masculine men
- c. Two traditionally feminine women
- d. A feminine man and a traditionally masculine man
- e. A feminine man and a traditionally feminine woman
- f. Two feminine men
- g. A feminine man and a masculine woman
- h. Two masculine women

By varying the people in the ways stated above, you might be able to tease apart the influence of physiological effect (if any) from gender roles (if any). But you can only be sure of your results if you control for power relationships, so for each type of pair you will have to find situations like these:

- a'. Both people have equal power over each other.
- b'. One person has more power over the other.

Furthermore, you'll have to test for a variety of ways in which people can have unequal power, including differences in age, education, finances, authority, and race. You will even have to consider matters as ordinary as whether the conversation is taking place in a neutral environment or in one in which one of the speakers feels more comfortable.

It's a daunting business, and unavoidably so. Because sociological factors are many and varied, sociolinguistic studies have to use impeccable methodology if they are to have a chance of getting reliable results (results that can be duplicated or confirmed in other studies). Most sociolinguistic studies, for that reason, are of a large sampling of people and present significant statistical data on a wide range of sociological factors as they report language data.

The introduction to this book promised to help you recognize how to use your own knowledge of language to answer many of the

common questions people have about language. But here I hope I have impressed on you the need for serious study before making generalizations. These two positions are not contradictory. If you know how to approach language data, you can recognize factors relevant to the issue at hand and see the sorts of questions that must be answered before conclusions can be counted on. In the case of language and gender issues, these questions are far too many and complex to be ignored.

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