
The Study of Language and Gender in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This paper explores approaches to research into language and gender in relation to online speech and offers ways in which future research may be conducted. Since the latter half of the 20th century, various approaches to the study of language and gender have developed with a diversity approach currently considered as being the most appropriate. The rise of the Internet and social media platforms have led to researchers analysing masses of online written speech, leading to further insights into language and gender. While this research reveals distinctions between male and female speech, it has failed to incorporate aspects of the diversity framework in a meaningful way. Rather, these studies offer global differentiators and definitions, particularly focusing on male ‘informativeness’ versus female ‘involvement’. However, such differentiators lack nuance, and it is argued that future research should explore ‘local’ factors and characteristics of gender-linked speech instead.

Keywords: gender-linked speech; online speech; sociolinguistics

概要

本稿では、オンラインでの発言における言語とジェンダーの関連性に関する研究へのアプローチを探り、そして今後の研究のあり方の提案を行う。言語とジェンダーの研究に対する様々なアプローチは、20世紀後半から発展し続け現在では「多様性」のアプローチが最も適切であると考えられている。インターネットとソーシャルメディア・プラットフォームの台頭により、研究者たちは大量のオンライン上の文章による発話を分析するようになり、言語とジェンダーに関するさらなる洞察がもたらされるようになった。このような研究は、男性と女性の話し方の違いを明らかにする一方で、「多様性」の枠組みの側面を有意義な形で取り入れることに失敗している。これらの研究は「グローバルな」差別化要因や定義を提供し、特に男性の「情報提供」という特質と、女性の「関与」という特質の対比に焦点を当てているが、このような差別化要因はニュアンスに欠けており、今後の研究では、代わりにジェンダーに関連する発話の「ローカルな」要因や特徴を探るべきだと主張する。

キーワード: ジェンダー関連スピーチ、オンライン・スピーチ、社会言語学

Sociolinguistic studies relating to gender are a relatively recent development, and have faced the challenge of an evolving and, in some quarters, still disputed notion of gender. Many scholars may now agree that a binary approach to gender is becoming outdated, although this view might not be shared by all members of the wider public. Moreover, the idea that all members of a particular gender use language equally and identify with their gender in the same way is also considered outdated, and sexuality has become a key consideration in language use.

It is against this backdrop that studies relating to language and gender have developed. It could be argued that earlier studies were constrained by the outdated definitions upon which they were based. The general trajectory of the approach to language and gender studies began with a so-called 'deficit' or 'dominance' approach, arguing for the existence of a 'women's language' distinct from that used by men in that it reflects the lower confidence and social status of women in society (Lakoff, 1975). A 'difference' approach also was developed which rejected the idea that women use language as a reflection of their lower status and sought to compare language use through a different lens (e.g., Labov, 1966; Trudgill, 1972; Tannen, 1990).

However, amongst other issues, both movements view gender as a binary concept: people are simply male or female. Social constructionist views (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Cameron, 2005) on language and gender acknowledge the diversity in gender variation among men and women, and that there is considerable variation in the way in which a single individual speaks. Diversity advocates have argued that too much focus had been placed on comparing male and female language, when what should have been compared was language use, for example, across the spectrum of the same gender. This could be done via ethnographic methods: observing a Community of Practice (CoP) (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992) over time and analysing the interactions of various members.

The age of the internet and social media has also presented a valuable opportunity for sociolinguists. Now, masses of text written by individuals are available for collection and analysis to provide valuable insights into the way we use language. Equally, this can be used to further assess the relationship between language and gender.

This paper reviews the current status of studies relating to online language use and gender and offers recommendations for future research. First, the general approaches to language and gender studies will be outlined, comparing strengths and weaknesses to identify the most appropriate model that future studies should aim to follow. Next, studies relating to online speech and gender will be examined based on how closely they follow the recommended approach. Finally, recommendations for future studies into online language use and gender will be presented.

General perspectives on the study of language and gender

Deficit/dominance

The ‘deficit’ or ‘dominance’ view of language and gender was proposed by Lakoff (1975), who refers to “linguistic sexism” (p. 2). She suggests that the use of language shows a division between men and women, where women are pushed towards language that demonstrates their relative weakness and lower social status, which, in turn, prevents them from accessing social power. Features of ‘women’s language’ (WL) include precise naming of colours, showing how women are relegated to making unimportant decisions, and the use of ‘soft’ expletives (such as “*oh dear*” rather than “*shit*”), showing the inequity in treatment of men and women. Moreover, women have particular adjectives reserved to them, such as “*adorable*”, “*lovely*”, (Lakoff, 1975, p. 12) which do not apply to concepts of power and influence that dominate the world of men. Overall, there is a strong proclivity towards politeness in WL, for example, using tag questions and a rising inflection to avoid making a direct or strong statement.

However, there are clear problems with this view of language and gender. Firstly, Lakoff drew upon her own speech and that of her acquaintances, along with the media and her intuitions, which may not apply to any broader demographics beyond white, middle-class Americans of the time. She also remarks that the only men to use WL are either academics or homosexuals, drawing attention to a further issue: if men do in fact use this language, there are perhaps more complex factors at play. This detriment can perhaps be attributed to the era during which this research was done. Contemporary ideas regarding sex and gender did not apply: people were seen as being either male or female and differentiation within those categories was limited. However, as Cameron (2005) comments, there is no such thing as the “generic” man or woman (p. 487). Moreover, the notion of women as automatically having lesser social status than men was held at the time, however, it may not be automatically applicable in a modern context. As can be seen in Global Gender Gap Index data (WEF, 2023), although the current state of women’s employment rates, conditions, and positions still shows that they remain behind men in these areas, women are nonetheless taking on a variety of social roles and positions of authority formerly associated with men.

Difference

Other approaches simply described and considered the ‘differences’ between how men and women speak, rather than assuming that WL starts from a position of weakness. Labov (1966, in Trudgill, 1972, p. 180) found that women veer more towards ‘standard’ or ‘prestige’ varieties than men and,

further, that they are quicker to adopt innovative variants (Labov, 1990, 2001, both in Cameron, 2006, p.728). Both Trudgill and Labov conclude that women tend to use language to obtain social status, and that their use of language reflects the fact that women are often judged by how they appear. Trudgill (1972), found that female participants would overreport use of standard forms (i.e., indicate and believe that they used them even when actual production deviated). This contrasted with men who appeared to value “covert prestige” leading them to underreport use of standard forms (p. 187). They believed they might be thought foolish if caught speaking ‘properly’ among family or friends and were more likely to introduce innovations that *deviated* from the standard variety than women. Trudgill attributed this differentiator to the speaker’s sex, as it was common amongst male respondents regardless of social class, the other variable under investigation. This research predates Lakoff’s, and thus, assuming a trajectory of development, these differences can indeed be seen to indicate the lower status of women in Western countries, even if the authors at the time did not view it as such.

A cultural difference perspective was also proposed by Tannen (1990), who distinguished between ‘rapport-talk’ and ‘report-talk’. The former establishes relationships by expressing understanding, talking about others, and has features such as overlapping speech supportively and empathetically. The latter demonstrates skill and knowledge when speaking in public and includes storytelling and (unsupportive) topic changing. According to Tannen, rapport-talk is primarily used by women, while report-talk is used by men. She observed the behaviour of same-sex pairs in conversation and considered how similar the behaviour was no matter the age. Tannen (1990) concluded that the different upbringing of boys and girls, who largely spend time among the same gender, creates “different worlds” (p. 279) that they inhabit and that the difference in our speech is a result of cultural factors which we are exposed to from early childhood. Once again, since data shows that women’s status was in fact inferior at this time, it cannot be discounted that this would influence the outcomes of such socialization.

These approaches display the same issue as the ‘deficit’ view, in that they are based on a binary definition of gender. Cameron (2005) argues that our identities are not constructed in contrast with the other gender, but with other members of our own gender: for example, middle-class women are more concerned with distinguishing themselves from working-class women than middle-class men. The ‘difference’ approaches do not consider the ways in which we individually create our identity through language, or ways in which members of the same gender wish to define themselves. Trudgill (1972) found that young working-class women exhibited the same variation as working-class men, suggesting that using language to distinguish themselves from the opposite sex is not the complete picture.

Diversity

The diversity approach to studying language and gender acknowledges contemporary views on gender variation and sexuality. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) and Cameron (2005) argue that gender is constructed locally, depending on the types of CoPs that men/women participate in, as well as the different forms of participation in mixed-gender CoPs. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) believe that we should avoid global terms and understand gender-linked variation by generalizing *from* the local context rather than ignoring it. They observed a much wider range of language variation from women across CoPs than that of men, concluding that women must use linguistic extremes to consolidate their position.

Cameron (2005) argues that the use of WL features amongst various transgender individuals or the constructed personas of telephone sex workers show how individuals are actively styling their identities rather than acting out their “gender template” (p. 492). A bisexual male was able to project an identity of femininity and of various ethnicities to his male callers through speech, and many females created personas of different ethnicities, performing “other’s ethnicities more ‘successfully’ than their own” from the caller’s perspective (Hall, 1995, p. 202). This might have been acting submissively demure to appear Asian or dominant to portray an Eastern European background. Cameron also points out variation amongst groups down to the individual, such as the frat boys observed by Kiesling (1997), who are seen at one time objectifying women and acting homophobic, while at other times appearing more sensitive in their language use: speakers low in the hierarchy used hedges and those holding a position of experience among the group used supportive speech. Moreover, sexuality influences how we speak in constructing our identity. Examples can be seen with use of feminine pronouns and adjectives by some persons in the LGBTQ+ community in reference to themselves or another, or the use of language to obtain peer approval within what Eckert refers to as the “heterosexual market” which leads to a *performance* close to the heterosexual model (Eckert, 1994, in Cameron, 2005, p. 495; Eckert, 2011).

This evidence of variation within CoPs, as well as within individual members of a CoP, paints a more vivid picture of how gender is constructed using language. It shows that language is used by individuals to affirm membership within a CoP while also differentiating themselves from other members of their gender – whether based on sexuality or internal views of masculinity/femininity.

The ‘diversity’ framework also coincides with, and perhaps necessitates, a change in methodology. Where ‘difference’ researchers collected data through participant observation and/or sociolinguistic interviews, the research studies of Eckert (1994) and Kiesling (1997), for example, were done through longitudinal ethnographic approaches. This involves entering and assimilating

with a CoP and observing members' speech and communications over several months, or perhaps years. The benefit of such research is the depth of data that can be obtained – capturing the speech of individuals across social settings and contexts, providing a more comprehensive account of the different ways in which people speak, and the factors that influence them. Although the difficulties with conducting such research are clear (time requirements, potential difficulty of integration within a community, and a relatively narrow scope of the data), the results not only reveal flaws with the short-term nature of prior research, which was confined to its particular context and preferences breadth over depth, but has helped reveal the ways that language is used to construct gender, as well as the complexity of this phenomenon. The more varied, localised evidence obtained, the more researchers will be able to develop generalisable terms and definitions and obtain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between language and gender. Moreover, this ability and desire to more clearly define facets of this relationship are what make the 'diversity' framework the most compelling to pursue moving forward: although global distinctions paint a broad picture, the dependency of gendered speech on a variety of local factors should not be overlooked.

Studies relating to online speech

Early studies

Having argued that a diversity approach may provide the most appropriate way to analyse language and gender, studies of language and gender in online speech are now explored. An early study of male and female text by Argamon et al. (2003, in Cameron, 2006, p. 732) seemed to corroborate the existence of Tannen's 'report' versus 'rapport' talk: men write with greater use of determiners and quantifiers, whereas women use a higher frequency of personal pronouns, demonstrating that women seem concerned with people and relationships, and men with specific objects. Here the distinction was made between male 'informativeness' and female 'involvement'. These two characteristics of male and female online speech were likewise investigated in subsequent studies (Herring and Paolillo, 2006; Schler et al., 2006, both in Bamman et al., 2014, p. 137) and a further distinction of 'explicit' or 'formal' (male) versus 'deictic' and 'contextual' (female) was made (Heylighen and Dewaele, 2002; Nowson, Oberlander and Gill, 2005, cited in Bamman et al., 2014, p. 137). This was further built on, again, by Argamon et al. (2007), in an analysis of blogs, which enabled highly accurate predictions of the author's gender by the computer software based on text-based analysis, thereby suggesting a clear distinction between male and female speech in this context. The analysis demonstrated a preference for content-related factors amongst males and style-related factors amongst females.

This kind of study has been criticised for ignoring other factors, such as genre, formality, and interactivity, which affect the way in which people write. Cameron (2006) argued that it is better to view these apparently gender-linked variations as markers of “affective/involved” and “referential/informational” orientations, which may be *connected* to gender rather than pointing directly to it (p. 733). These studies also attempt to develop global terms rather than local ones: they do not account for how our habits and membership of CoPs affect our linguistic behaviour, nor do they consider the variation within a gender or factors that lead to a divergence of language. Bamman et al. (2014) refer to the example of “ing”/“in”. Beyond gender or class, use of “ing” can suggest that the author is educated, formal, articulate, effortful or pretentious, while “in” may suggest the opposite of these traits (p. 138). Although there are distinctions between male and female language use in written communications, our analysis should not end at that point: to provide a better understanding of language and gender a more in-depth analysis is required.

Large-scale open vocabulary studies

Technological developments have led to an ‘open-vocabulary’ approach to large-scale analysis of masses of text to distinguish particular linguistic features as gender-linkage, also similar to the above study by Argamon et al. (2007). Schwartz et al. (2013) collected hundreds of thousands of Facebook posts and analysed the results based on personality, gender, and age. The results with respect to gender fall in line with those suggested by prior work: articles, aggression, expletives and object references are predictive of males, while women use more emotion words, e.g. ‘excited’, and write more about psychological, emotional states or social processes, e.g. ‘love you’. Although, men may more frequently refer to their own partner than women, this is because women talk about others’ relationships more often. This study, again, falls into the trap of providing global distinctions – the impression is that women do not talk about sports, for example, and minority identities and sexuality are not represented in the data. Had personality type and age been cross-referenced with gender, rather than analysing them discretely, the study may have given more nuanced results.

Similar research of fourteen thousand Twitter posts was conducted by Bamman et al. (2014). With regard to gender-linked linguistic variation, the results echo the findings of Schwarz et al. in that women use more kinship terms (e.g. ‘mom’, ‘sister), abbreviations (e.g. ‘lol’, ‘omg’) and expressive vowel lengthening (e.g. ‘coool’) among other features, whereas men use more taboo words and/or abbreviations (e.g. ‘mfao’) and reference named entities (e.g. sports clubs) more frequently. However, the study identified “clusters of authors”, collected by similar word groups, many of which deviate from the results of the two studies above: some male dominated clusters use taboo words significantly less than women, or a cluster made up almost entirely of women used

dictionary-form words significantly more than men. Moreover, no cluster is *only* male or female, showing that language can align closely with the opposite gender. For example, although men may discuss named entities more than women, minority groups of women exist in these clusters who use these features in equal amounts, suggesting the significance of ‘topic’ as a factor of language use. Furthermore, men are simply communicating regarding their hobbies and careers, which cannot be summarised as a proclivity towards informativity. The conclusion is that researchers should ask how authors’ linguistic choices construct their gender identities and that the model of “informational” versus “involvement” is “descriptively inadequate” (p. 153).

This above study demonstrates the flaws of simply collecting speech and separating usage by gender. The “cluster of authors” might be analogous to an online CoP, however, “membership” will likely be on a larger scale, and there may be multiple CoPs within these clusters. Therefore, the recommendation is to analyse “individual micro-interactions” in order to show how “gender is manifested in and constructed by language” (Bamman et al., 2014, p. 153). Although these interactions are undefined in the study, it is likely that the suggested target of future research is on individual responses and conversations within particular clusters of authors in order to investigate the relationships between online speech and gender in various settings and contexts. This appears to support the earlier recommendations of Eckert, advocating a diversity approach to the analysis of online speech. Although Bamman et al do not explicitly do this in detail, the evidence strongly suggests its necessity to provide a more accurate view of language and gender in the digital age, and thereby providing a valuable starting point from which future studies could begin.

Unfortunately, this is largely not the case and most studies of online speech and gender have continued the trend of analysing mass amounts of data in search of global definitions. Park et al. (2016) conducted research into language used on Facebook, finding results comparable to the study by Schwartz et al. (2013). Here the distinction was made between “assertive” and “affiliative” language, finding that women were significantly more affiliative but not less assertive, although men used more highly assertive and cold language (expletives, criticism, and controversial topics). Park et al. (2016) reach a somewhat more nuanced conclusion, as social role (rather than gender) is seen as the predictor for assertiveness: in supervisory roles men and women are equally assertive, however, on Facebook everyone is simply labelled as a ‘friend’ which acts as a “social equalizer” affecting language use (p. 21).

Hilte et al. (2020) analysed use of language by adolescents based on age, gender and education. Again, the results are slightly more nuanced, observing that older females produce more polarized, subjective messages, concluding that they are more committed to emotional expressiveness. The

language of females also tended to become less typically ‘female’ as they got older. However, the remaining analysis focuses on familiar patterns, such as greater use of taboo words by males and a focus on social interaction by females. Finally, Koch et al. (2022) looked at language and emoticon/emoji use in instant messages, finding that women use emoji more often and more diversely than men. These observations are consistent with the distinctions made in previous studies (e.g., Argamon et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2013; Park et al., 2016).

Overall, there is a clear pattern of analysing large quantities of data to discover potentially broadly applicable linguistic behaviour that distinguishes language as either male or female. Even since the recommendations of Bamman et al. (2014), the focus of language and gender research in online speech has remained entrenched in the ‘difference’ approach. This makes sense, as the evidence demonstrates that there are clear distinctions between the way women and men speak online, and the ability of technology to analyse vast amounts of text makes searching for broad patterns amongst a large population an attractive proposition. However, the dearth of research into specific “clusters of authors” or “micro-interactions” has left research in this area lacking. Studies tend to be concerned with finding global terms and definitions rather than looking at online language and gender in a more local setting.

Discussion

In this paper, historical approaches to language and gender studies have been discussed, concluding that a ‘diversity’ perspective is the most appropriate model for researchers to follow. ‘Deficit’ or ‘dominance’ approaches may have reflected the entrenched gender biases of their eras but it is the opinion of this author that they are becoming passé in contemporary understandings on the role of women in society. In tandem with ‘difference’ approaches, the focus on binarism in the definition of gender is also outmoded. Rather than simply identifying the differences in the language used by men and women, studies should focus on how language is used to construct our identity and gender and affirm our membership within various CoPs. This requires in-depth analysis of the language used within a community and how its members interact, as well as the different communities that individuals are a part of and how this affects their use of language. This is perhaps more relevant than ever: women were perceived as “interlopers” within many mixed-gender CoPs (Eckert, 2000, in Cameron, 2005, p. 498). For example, female British MPs tended to conform to the traditional rules governing debates, which “non-interlopers” could more freely depart from without “compromising their credentials”. On the other hand, in workplaces where service and interpersonal skills are increasingly in demand (as opposed to physical strength or craft), Cameron (2005) points out that the language and behaviour was becoming increasingly “feminine”

by members of both sexes. However, as social roles continue to evolve, this perception may fade and the use of language within such CoPs will likewise evolve. Thus, local research of language use in various contexts is required, rather than the identification of global terms that try to encapsulate all persons.

This paper has also outlined the current approaches to research regarding online speech and gender. The overall theme is a preference for large-scale studies involving masses of text which are used to distinguish linguistic behaviour as either male or female, with the studies entrenched within the ‘difference’ approach to the study of language and gender. This has led to language being described using global terms such as either “informational” or “involved”. However, in-depth analysis of this data, as conducted by Bamman et al. (2014), reveals the existence of minority identities and presences within what they refer to as “clusters of authors” that do not adhere to the trends implied by such global terms. This evidence strongly suggests that research into online speech and gender should adopt a ‘diversity’ approach and examine the language used by various online communities to see how gender and identity are constructed through language in online interactions. Unfortunately, this has not been taken up in any meaningful way: although the research appears to be leaning into more nuanced analyses, there is still a preference for collecting data from large numbers of users to extract broadly applicable trends, rather than detailed analysis of language use within individual communities.

Conclusion

Future research could focus on these localized communities in the same way that ethnographic studies focus on CoPs. By collecting and analysing data from a relatively small number of users, it can be seen how digital users utilize language to construct their identities within an online CoP and how this compares with other users and membership across different CoPs. This may be especially insightful when viewing communities typically considered masculine or feminine to determine how members of the minority group also use language to position themselves within those communities.

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