

Effects of Societal Gender Roles on Male and Female Language Use and Communication

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Abstract

There are countless differences between males and females from the way they look, voice pitch, muscle tone, etc. Some would argue that the variations between men and women are solely due to genetics, but there are distinctions that are not influenced by genetics. One such distinction is the imbalance of language use among males and females. This paper aims to explore the research of multiple linguistic variables specific to men and to women while also revealing how societal expectations influence language differences. The topics to be address are word choice variation, conversational styles, hypercorrect English, tag questions, disclaimers, and the entrapment of gender roles. Also, to determine if the research holds up, I included my own research gathered from a three question survey. The paper concludes with a study that exposes the unfortunate consequences of attempting to break away from gender roles and why they continue to thrive in modern society.

Keywords: linguistics, tag questions, disclaimers, gender roles, expletive, hypercorrect English, conversation style, word choice, miscommunication, and audience

Introduction:

How males and females utilize their language whether it is consciously or not is judged significantly by those around. Men and women understand this inevitable and instinctive judgment which causes them to manifest a linguistic style that depicts what is expected of them. Language usage is also greatly influenced by circumstantial factors such as setting, audience, and even the gender of both the speaker and listener. However, the most influential determiner of linguistic discrepancies among men and women is society. Conforming to society's dictatorial standards results in gender-specific linguistic variations that generate advantageous or damaging implications while also creating division, miscommunication, and inequality between the sexes.

Word Choice Variation

Whether intentionally or not, individual words are labeled and can carry stigmas. Classifying a word as "feminine" is one such label. Examples of this feminine marker and also lexical distinctions between men and women can be seen most clearly with adjectives as Robin Lakoff indicates in her novel "Language and Woman's Place". Lakoff explains that such words as "fuchsia", "maroon", "precious", and "adorable" are exceedingly more likely to be spoken by women rather than men (qtd. in Hussein, 2012). This disproportionate word choice is a result of speakers and listeners tuning into the underlying markers embedded into words. Doing so, causes people, and in this case men, to shy away from certain words. Since men would rarely use certain words, it grants the notion that these words are feminine in nature making them inferior words to be used by men. The gender norms of society mandate that men encompass all aspects of masculinity and recoil from feminine qualities. Therefore if a male was to incorporate words like the above, he would be ridiculed for displaying inferior feminine attributes. Eliminating colorful, expressive words from men's vocabulary is the safest move for protecting their expected

masculine role. The masculine and feminine language in society is a double edged sword. Males must watch what they say to avoid ridicule while women are belittled for employing expressive language.

Use of Expletives

An additional linguistic distinction between men and women is the use of expletives or swear words. Females tend to use less expletives than males which could be linked to women's upbringings that praise modesty and "lady-likeness". Young girls are corrected for bad language in regard to their gender whereas boys are amended based upon appropriate behavior. Telling a girl that she is "unlady-like" for using bad language is essentially saying she is a lesser woman because of it. With pressure such as this based on gender, it is no surprise that females shy away from expletive use. Many experiments have been conducted in attempt to discover the rate of expletives for males and females. Karen Precht of Kent State University conducted one such experiment in which a computer program was used to calculate expressions in almost 900,000 words of informal conversation. The study indicated that men used nearly double as many the expletives as women (2008). This research does not claim that women rarely swear whereas men have no filter because that is not the case. Situation and audience has a strong influence on the rate of expletives for both genders. Precht also explained that when women did swear they were "more sensitive to context and would change their level of cursing based on the situation" (2008). This information is relative to societal, gender roles due to the genteel facade of ladylikeness. Women are much more aware of their language use than males simply because they have been conditioned to be. Expanding on circumstantial expletive usage, Maria Nicolau and Katharina Sukamto's article "Male and Female Attitudes towards Swear Words" explains how women and men incorporate more expletives among a group of the same sex rather than

mixed-gender settings (2014). It is interesting that, though both gender use expletives, each prefers to do so amongst their own gender. It could be argued that if it were not for gender roles both sexes could express this linguistic aspect of language together rather than separate.

Conversation Styles

When males and females converse, there is oftentimes a misunderstanding by cause of differing conversational styles. Women could potentially think less of men and vice versa due to a clashing of values encouraged by society. Because men are expected to prove their masculine vigor and outperform other men, they are accustomed to view conversations as competitive means for establishing power whereas women regard discussion in terms of intimacy and cooperation (Michel, 1994). In other words, males tend to be the talkers and women the listeners. Because of this, men can be perceived as selfish and pretentious when in reality gender norms dictate that men must establish their worth and identity based upon their accomplishments. In order for these accomplishments to be known, males will publicly boast about themselves which is an action strongly discouraged within the female community. Females are conditioned to be modest, unimposing individuals. Therefore when bragging does occur for women, it tends to take place on a very private level (Michel, 1994). Societal, gender norms encourage self-pride for men while unjustly discriminating women for doing the same. If a man discusses his achievements, he is considered well-established and valuable; however, a woman is seen as being immodest and snobbish.

On the other hand, men can distinguish women as being subordinate due to their frequent roles as listeners. Deborah Tannen in her novel “You Just Don’t Understand” explains this phenomenon, “the art of listening frames one as lower, but when women listen to men, they are not thinking in terms of status. Unfortunately, their attempts to reinforce connections can be

misinterpreted as a subordinate position” (1990). We must understand that men and women are merely doing what is expected of them. And because gender roles value opposing standards, there can be misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Imbalance of Hypercorrect English, Tag Questions, and Disclaimers

Due to societal conditioning, women are perceived as the inferior gender which, in turn, can affect how men and women communicate with and understand one another. Because of this perception of women, women’s language tends to incorporate more modulated and defensive linguistic forms in comparison to men. Such forms include hypercorrect English, tag questions, and disclaimers. An example of women displaying hypercorrect English can be seen in a study analyzing the pronunciation of the “-ing” suffix. The data analysis revealed that 62.2% of the men pronounced the suffix inaccurately while only 28.9% of women pronounced incorrectly (Xia, 2013). Although this data focuses on a singular, linguistic variable, the difference is significant and suggests underlying implications influencing women’s language. Women tend to exemplify Standard English in order to elevate their already belittled station in society. Basel Hussein’s article “Language and Sex: The Relationship of Language to Behavior” addresses this issue and further explains that women are aware of their inferiorly perceived role in society forcing them to remediate this discrimination through their language (2012). Society’s depiction of women feels relatively uncontrollable. However, a woman’s language usage is within her control which clarifies why women would wish to follow Standard English so closely.

In addition to women’s modulated language usage, there are tag questions and disclaimers. Tag questions are unnecessary questions that conclude a statement. Ending a statement with the questions, “-you know what I mean?” or “-does that make sense?” are examples of tag questions. Linguist M. Fishman conducted an experiment in which the number

of tag questions were calculated per sex in male to female conversations. Fishman's data analysis determined that females used three times as many tag questions as males (qtd. in Xia, 2013). In an almost apologetic tone, these questions imply doubt in the statement it is connected with giving rise to negative inferences regarding women. The next linguistic variables to be discussed are disclaimers. Disclaimers are similar to tag questions, but a disclaimer precedes the main statement. For example, if someone were to say, "I could be wrong, but I think the answer is C," the phrase "I could be wrong" is the disclaimer. And like tag questions, disclaimers carry negative connotations and women demonstrate them more often than men (Mahmud, 2010). Viable cause for these language use distinctions is linked to societal expectations. Having varying roles for males and females causes confusion between the two. The male role dictates that men suppress and dismiss emotions while the female role encourages and even expects women to be overly emotional (Grob, Meyers, & Schuh, 1997). Consequently, men have trouble expressing and interpreting emotions which forces women to modulate their language. And when women frequently utilize linguistic variables that suggest undesirable implications, the result can cause judgment by men. Ultimately, gender roles are the primary contributor in women's perceived subordinate role, gender miscommunication, and language inequality.

Personal Research

Results from numerous experiments reveal the gender imbalance for the use of Standard English, tag questions, and disclaimers. However, to test this claim I conducted my own survey consisting of three questions concerning the use of these linguistic variables:

1. How often do you use tag questions? Example: -, you know what I mean? -, does that make sense?

1 Never 2 Rarely 3 Sometimes 4 Often 5 Frequently

2. How often do you use disclaimers? Example: I don't know if I am right, but - This could be wrong, but -

1 Never 2 Rarely 3 Sometimes 4 Often 5 Frequently

3. How important is using proper English to you?

1 Not Important 2 Slightly Important 3 Moderately Important 4 Important 5 Very Important

The survey questioned 30 females and 30 males for a total of 60 participants ranging from the age of 18 to 59. To further support the claim that women use more tag questions and disclaimers and also prefer Standard English, the female participants should render a higher average on all three questions than the males. Meaning the males use tag questions and disclaimers less and are less concerned with Standard English.

As the research would conclude, the survey results and the research claims matched. Women had consistently higher answer averages than the men on all three questions. For question one, women received an average of (3.80) and men (3.16). Question two scored women an average of (3.23) and men (2.66). And lastly, question three calculated as a (4.46) average for women and (3.66) for men. Although the survey reached across a small sample size, each question showed significant differences in averages which only further reinforces the research already conducted in gender language differences.

Breaking Out of Gender Roles

It can be argued that linguistic, gender discrepancies are due to the simple fact that men and women have different genetics. However, I would disagree with that claim. It is true that males and females have varying genetics that could potentially have some influence in gender language, but most linguistic researchers and myself believe the distinctions are more so a result of societal conditioning. To reinforce this point, Jeffery Rasmussen and Barbara Moely of

Tulane University lead a study that analyzed characteristics listeners gave speakers. The speakers would exhibit linguistic attributes opposite or the same of their gender and listeners would determine characteristics such as competency and likeability. Their results state, “Women who take on male sex role appropriate behaviors are less liked and are seen as less competent. Likewise, males who take on female behaviors are described as homosexuals, judged as highly incompetent, and less attractive” (1986). This study exposes the double-edged, brutal reality of gender roles. Nothing in this situation involves genetics. The males are ridiculed for being weak-minded and “homosexual” while the females are branded as “uppity” and “noninstrumental” for merely diverging from their gender role through language use (Rasmussen & Moely, 1986). There is no escape for males nor females from oppressive, gender roles. The major ruler in men and women’s language use is society. When individuals attempt to break away from society’s expectations, fear of ridicule coerces and entraps them back to their role which only broadens the gap of inequality between men and women and continues the cycle of misunderstanding and miscommunication. To remedy these issues, the first steps should be taken with oneself. If we observe our own language use and contemplate its reasoning, we can begin to represent ourselves how we desire and not how society expects us to while also developing understanding between genders.

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