

Sociolinguistics and Women's Language

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ABSTRACT: By analyzing the previous literature, this paper looks into the salient features of women's language from the perspective of sociolinguistics. It is found that women are not necessarily using more lexicon of colors, particles, intensifiers, hedges, or more tag questions, polite forms, phatic stress, etc. What they actually do has to be analyzed with a mixed factors like social position, topic, relationship with the interlocutor, her personality, the particular occasion, etc; Women are not necessarily less dominant or with less power in the interaction with men. Social position and the specific context are two other major elements impacting on their linguistic performance; Both theoretical and empirical methods are applicable to studying women's language, and research design should be attached great importance to, involving the two groups of moderators, methodological moderators and contextual moderators. Based on the findings, future study on women's language can be further contextualized and further categorized. For instance, when looking into women's talk in court, we should specify her position. We may further compare women's different uses of language between judge, prosecution attorney, defence attorney, jury, or defendant in different cases such as finance, divorce, criminal offence, or others.

KEYWORDS: sociolinguistics, conventional, theoretical, empirical, women's language

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender has always been one of the important components in social studies, and massive researches have been conducted to address the differences lying between the two genders, and successively, the finding of inequality emerges preceding feminism and women's activism that are frequently advocated as the purpose and significance of a series of social studies. With sociology intersecting with linguistics, researchers find that there is a substantial space to be explored in terms of language used by different genders under social context, a special domain of sociolinguistics study. Surveying the previous studies, researchers always develop their own studies in two ways, theoretical and empirical.

In theoretical studies, they discuss the key issues on the basis of previous theoretical articles as well as their own their own understanding and introspection. For example, by referring to prestigious works of scholars, Eliasoph (1987) develops a deep discussion on women's language in his paper *Politeness, power, and women's language: rethinking study of language and gender*. On the other hand, empirical studies have been witnessed with fruitful outcomes. For example, Baxter (2012) studies women of the corporation from a sociolinguistic perspective of senior women's leadership language in the UK; Pebrianti (2013) specializes in women's language features used by Indonesian females; Mahmoud (2017) focuses on women's linguistic features in Disney movies. No matter which resources the data come from, people have been trying to construct a framework of how women use language in specific context, which may be resulted by the dominating ideologies of the public, or in converse, may also shape the general attitude of the major population towards women's linguistic performance.

Methodology of the studies on women's language is another independent issue worthy of special attention. Works at the offset of this field build a mount of theoretical frameworks, whose conceptual analysis provides the basic model for the following researches on particular cases. Conversational analysis and corpus analysis are the two major tactics of empirical study. Interestingly, the context can be amazingly diverse, e.g. women's talk in the workplaces, in renowned movies, in a remarkable community, etc. Moreover, how those numerous studies are able to make sense is worth paying special attention to.

II. FEATURES OF CONVENTIONAL WOMEN'S LANGUAGE

The founder of women's language study, Lakoff (1975), is among the early scholars who undergo speculative thinkings and come up with detailed explanations about how to talk like a lady. He finds that women's styles of speaking can be spotted in all levels of English grammar.

In the level of lexicon, first, women precisely are more capable of naming colors than men do, e.g. beige, ecru, aquamarine, lavender, and so on. They are unremarkable in women's active vocabulary, but not in men's, because men tend to consider a discussion of fine colour trivial, ridiculous, or irrelevant to the real world, and men tend to relegate such a non-crucial topic to the business of women, showing an inequality between men and women.

What's more, it is noticed that men and women are different in the use of particles. Here is a sample contrast from Lakoff, whose particles will tell you one of its speaker from another:

(a) *Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.*

(b) *Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.*

You will find with no doubt that "oh dear" should be the words from a woman, while "shit" should come from a man. Actually, this is what a prototypical man and a prototypical woman do, which may be a universal concept because it is not only true in the English speaking world, but also in other communities like Chinese. It is surely believed that "shit" is so dirty and rude a word that men are more likely to make use of it than women. In Lakoff's opinion, the choice of particle indexes the degree of its user's strong emotion, and women tend to be thought of the users practising less strong particles. However, practically, a number of women also get used to uttering particles that are relatively strong.

In addition to naming colors and particles, similar disparities also exist in adjectives. Some adjectives are neutral regarding the sex of their speakers, while some others are considered women only. Here are the examples:

neutral women only

great adorable

terrific charming

cool sweet

neat lovely

divine

In the level of syntax, according to Lakoff, there is only one rule which can distinguish woman from man - tag questions. It is an expression somewhere in the middle between a statement and a yes-no question, because of its less assertiveness than the former but more confidence than the latter. This is a hot issue to be discussed by the following scholars looking into women's language. More macro-level women's language is introduced by Zimmerman and Quéré (2000). They believe women tend to talk more than men, speak in more polite form, ask more questions, and be more cooperative.

Apart from the features of conventional women's language described above, others are the use of hedges, intensifiers, and emphatic stress, etc., all of which are later named tentative language by Leaper and Robnett (2011). The reason why they are assumed conventional is that all the features are stereotypes of what women's language should be. It is similar to Chomsky's theory of linguistics, who has been devoted to describing what languages should be in general, ignoring what it will be in a particular context. That's why women's language study is more of an issue in interactional sociolinguistics rather than in the domain of general linguistics.

III. THEORETICAL NEGOTIATION OF THE EXPECTED WOMEN'S LANGUAGE

There are some common disputes about women and women's language, gender and gender difference. For instance, should we consider women less-dominant or women merely in a different position from men, similarly, women's language less-dominant or merely a different style from men? Is women's conventional language powerless or in a polite form? Is women's language really powerless or powerful in some context as well?

Dominance or Difference

It is undoubted that differences exist between the language use of genders, bringing the crucial issue of inequality. The reason why feminists always focus on this issue is that people think men are dominant in power in this patriarchal society, and so are they in speeches especially the talk between different sexes. Hence, whether the differences of language use lying between genders leads to men's dominance in speeches becomes a topic of debate.

In Dominance Approach, it is believed that men dominate women in terms of social power, and definitely, men dominate women in terms of speech as well. For example, Zimmerman and West (1975) conducts a research concentrating on the way in which men usually interrupt women during a conversation. Maynard (1980) notes who would dominate the topic change. Fishman (1983) claims that men have much

greater control than women in conversations. After all, women are oppressed by men in power and consequently in language use, i.e., linguistic differences can be interpreted as men's linguistic dominance over women or women's subordination to men. In the author's view, this approach comes from the ancient ideology when there was an evident concept of hierarchy and women were placed at a relatively low position comparing to their men. People took it for granted. As the society proceeds into a more civilized one, the average attitudes to genders turn to be equal. Then comes the next approach.

In Difference Approach, men and women are raised in different subcultures, and the differences can be attributed to their natural differences, different cultural backgrounds, or different forms of socialization (Deborah, 1991). Eliasoph (1987) suggests that at least some of the linguistic differences between men and women can be considered as different choices, because they look for different things in the interactions. Women are more likely to emphasize their connection with each other, while men tend to focus more on their autonomy. Smith (1977) observes that women are more likely to see themselves enmeshed in a context than men, while men assert themselves separate from any specific context, which is caused by the fact, she says, that women's work always serves to the work of men that tends to be more abstracted and decontextualized. Chodorow (1974) and Gilligan (1982) investigate the linguistic differences between men and women's "games". They assume that men and women are playing different "games" in their actual interaction, so they turn out to adopt different use of language. This approach analyzes women's language from a more practical perspective, because it considers both intrinsic and extrinsic features of women, and the mixed forces would drive each woman speak in her own style in a particular context. To sum up, men's dominance does not necessarily determines women's linguistic performance. Another important factor is the actual position that women are occupying in modern society, because it will determine what kind of "game" they are going to play and then what language they are going to use.

Powerlessness or Politeness

Lakoff (1975) assumes that women tend to use more tag questions and qualifiers/intensifiers, excessive politeness, specialized vocabulary, or request rather than command as the countermeasures to their powerlessness. In other words, since in the status with less power, women use tag questions and qualifiers to show their respect or positive attitude, and they speak in a more polite way as a strategy in response to their less powerful identity. This argument shifts the identity difference between male and female into the identity difference between parties with more power and with less power, i.e., a woman in a more powerful position may use less tag questions and speak in a less polite way; a man in a less powerful position may also use more tag questions and speak in a more polite way. It seems too over-absolute to conclude that women must speak in this way or women must not speak in that way. For example, in the book *Language, Gender, and Society*, Henley (1983) makes a wide survey of studies which deal with women's using tag questions, and the result shows that some studies do find that women use more tag questions. However, there are also studies which conclude that in some context women use as many tag questions as men, and in some other context women use much less tag questions than men. Hence, it is not powerlessness that makes women speak in a particular way, either polite or impolite, but the context does, meaning the problem of gender inequality in language is determined by multiple factors.

Brown (1980) investigates women's politeness in Mayan village by asking under what conditions or in what situations women usually use more polite expressions than men do? And why? She divides contexts into three - women to women, women to men, and men to men - types with different levels of power in each, and asserts that the different levels of politeness function as strategies in reaction with different levels power. She finds that in the village, women are more polite to each other in terms of hedging, apologizing for imposing, minimizing. This finding is too puzzling to keep in congruence with the proposition that women can enjoy more power in female-female context interaction and they are supposed to use less polite expressions. Based on her explanation, women play a different "game" in this context following a different set of rules comparing to their interaction with males.

In the author's opinion, women adopt politeness strategy accordingly, which can never be isolated from a real context. Stereotypically, women, living such a patriarchal context, tend to utilize politeness strategy in response to their less powerful position in their communication with men. However, theory has to adapt itself to practice. Apart from considering their interlocutors, women also adjust their strategies by taking their own status, their objective, optimal method of realizing the objective, even their age, etc. into their account. It resembles more a pragmatic issue, and the actual strategy of politeness are attributed to a personal choice rather than a rigid rule for women.

Powerful or Powerless

People's presuppositional attitude empowers men more than women, and the marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of (Lakoff, 1975). This point of view can be unfolded into two aspects. First, the ways

women are expected to speak reflect the marginality and powerlessness of women, meaning a set of what are considered appropriate for women's speech are embedded into everybody's mind, manifesting women as powerless and subordinate to men and further leading to the ingrained ideology of a standard women's way of speaking. Second, the ways in which women are spoken of also reflect the marginality and powerlessness of women. One typical example is the expressions for addressing women in this patriarchal society. There is an unequal tendency of using address forms to refer to a general concept (e.g., the pronominal usage of "he" or the vocabulary "businessman", "policeman", etc. to cover both genders). As the consequence, the original studies of women's language are definitely connected to feminism or women's rights activism. Making a comparison between the past and current mass attitudes, you may find that the awareness of inequality and potential damage to women's psychology has driven the unequal use of language to be avoided. Lakoff's ideas are then widely investigated, and criticized as well in terms of the following ways.

First, her works are speculative and lack empirical basis (Mulac & Bradac, 1995), showing low credibility. Second, it exaggerates gender differences in communication (Crawford, 1995), failing to acknowledge the general similarities between man and women's communication pattern. Third, what she defines as women's language depends more on the relative status or power of the language users, rather than their genders (Henley, 2001), shifting the focus of discussion from gender to individual status. Fourth, her interpretation of women's language is deficient. According to Spender (1984), the difference between men and women's language does not necessarily reflect the superiority of masculine utterance, instead, feminine forms may process valuable functions. For instance, women often use tag questions in order to emphasize affiliation (Leaper & Ayres, 2007) rather than lack of power or confidence. Among those critiques above, three are trying to mitigate the impact of gender on power thereby on language use. Scholars are increasingly attributing the differences of language use to social factors rather than biological one, e.g. social class (status), relationship between language users, or even individual personality. Answering the question "is women's language powerless or powerful" is indeed intractable, because it has to be analyzed accordingly.

An interesting and hot issue that has attracted public attention recently is a piece of CNN news, which reports that "women leaders are doing a disproportionately great job at handling the pandemic, so why aren't there more of them", an opinion editorial on April 17, 2020. It praises three women political leaders, Cai Yinwen from Taiwan, Angela Merkel from Germany, and Jacinda Ardern from New Zealand, for their excellent performance in reacting to the world wide coronavirus pandemic. It may be not enough to tell women's outweighing in political power, but at least proves that women are able to qualify that powerful position. The question is whether it is a coincidence or not. Take Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand for an example, who is really impressive with the speech she delivered on March 19 in which she announced a shut of borders and a four-week lockdown of the country on March 23 requiring all non-essential workers to stay at home except for grocery shopping or exercising nearby, the country had carried out widespread testing and recorded over 1,300 cases but only nine deaths at that time. Actually, she is acute to the potential crisis, considerate in planning, and powerful in implementing her announcement. It can not be assumed that the country is saved because of its female Prime Minister, however, the country is indeed moving out of crisis under the leadership of this female regime, meaning she successfully employs her power which may, in turn, embed more power into her future words.

Researches and examples suggest that powerful language or powerless language should not be ascribed to gender difference, rather, it should be put into the context with an integrative analysis, including subjects, social class, specific situations, personalities, etc. Even the weather during the occurrence of the talk can play an important role in determining the actual language performance.

IV. RECENT EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON WOMEN'S LANGUAGE

As is discussed in the preceding section, Lakoff's works are frequently criticized of lacking empirical basis. Data from people's daily life is cogent in proving propositions objectively thereby is prone to convince readers. Numerous researches have been conducted in this way.

Typical Studies

O'Barr and Atkin (1998) studies the language variations of how women and men talk in court which includes both ethnographic and experimental components. The findings suggest that not all women present a high frequency of women's language features at least in one particular context and that men do. A high incidence of those features seem to be more closely relevant to social position in the society and the context of the courtroom. Hence, in the particular case of court talk, this research re-conceptualizes the dichotomy of "powerful language" and "powerless language" and concludes the significant impact of not only gender, but also social position and context on language variations.

The major stream of empirical studies design their research on the basis of Lakoff's categorization of women's language - e.g. hedges, tag questions, rising intonations, empty adjectives, intensifiers, super-polite forms, emphatic stress, and so on. Subon (2013) looks into gender differences in the use of linguistic forms in the speech of men and women in the Malaysian context. He choose five local males and five local females as the

participants and applies a variety of tools for collecting data: recording, direct observation, and semi-structured interview. The results show that women use more polite address forms than men, ask more questions, and use more humorous language, but slightly less fillers, hedges, and affirmatives than men. In addition, women's topic focus more on family, self, feelings, and affiliations, while men more likely on doing things such as works. Another example is Hardini, Darmawangsa, and Nada's "A Study of Women's Language Varieties in French Movie" (2017). They employ qualitative method in studying the women's language in the movie of *La Vie en Rose*, using observation and note-taking techniques. The results reveal 10 types of language varieties in the movie, which are from Lakoff's categories of women's language, with rising intonation the highest frequency (50.9%) and hedge the lowest (0.9%). These studies, representing a bunch of empirical studies, definitely provide us with precise figures. However, the data do not uncover any scientific truth or make any sense, but merely a set of numbers that show how it is going on in the particular case, because another case would undoubtedly present researchers with another set of numbers which suggest no universal laws. The reason may come from the design of empirical research.

Empirical Designs

To design an investigation into women's language, one should first select a target or a group of target as the subjects, then adopt reasonable instruments to collect the data, and finally use legitimate methods to analyze the data. In fact, gender differences may be moderated across different designs in the first two steps.

Leaper and Robnett (2011) propose two groups of moderators that may influence the results of observing gender differences, methodological moderators and contextual moderators. The former include operational definition (e.g. choose different markers as the tool in conversational analysis), length of observation, method of recording, gender of the first author, and year of study; the latter include gender composition, relationship between conversational partners, student status (it is believed college students are less gender typed than other individuals), groups size, conversational activity (the type of topic or activity may mediate gender difference in communication), and physical setting (gender-typed behavior may be more likely to occur in unfamiliar settings than familiar settings (Deaux & Major, 1987)). Those moderators demonstrate that research design plays a vital part in determining what the results of the research will be. Only if more factors are taken into consideration, would the results be more convincing and the research itself be more valuable and significant.

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Women are not necessarily using more lexicon of colors, particles, intensifiers, hedges, or more tag questions, polite forms, phatic stress, etc. What they actually do has to be analyzed with a mixed factors like social position, topic, relationship with the interlocutor, her personality, the particular occasion, etc.

Women are not necessarily less dominant or with less power in the interaction with men. Social position and the specific context are two other major elements impacting on their linguistic performance.

Both theoretical and empirical methods are applicable to studying women's language, and research design should be attached great importance to, involving the two groups of moderators, methodological moderators and contextual moderators.

On the basis of the three conclusions above, future study on women's language can be further contextualized and further categorized. For instance, when looking into women's talk in court, we should specify her position. We may further compare women's different uses of language between judge, prosecution attorney, defence attorney, jury, or defendant in different cases such as finance, divorce, criminal offence, or others.

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