

MALE AND FEMALE SPEECH STYLES: EVIDENCE FROM LITERARY TEXTS*

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies in conversational styles have claimed that men and women differ in their linguistic expressions. In addition, western behavioural constructs of masculinity and femininity are mirrored in language where men's language is considered powerful while women's language is powerless. This paper reports the findings of a study on gender and speech style. The study involves text analysis. It seeks to examine the portrayal of the western perceptions of male and female linguistic expressions through the *lexical* and *syntactic-pragmatic* traits of male and female speech in literary texts. Conversations of male and female characters as portrayed by the writers in an American novel, 'The Great Gatsby' and a Malaysian novel, 'Salina' were analysed. The analysis focuses on the use of *special lexicon*, *imprecise intensifiers*, *super polite forms*, *expletives*, *tag questions*, *hedges* and *direct quotations* by the characters in these two novels.

INTRODUCTION

Members of certain cultures hold beliefs or have certain perceptions and expectations of how a man and woman should conduct themselves in that particular society. These might involve characteristics of gender-biased costumes, activities, areas of expertise and social roles in society as well as differences in ways of communicating. Our constructs of masculinity and femininity influence our reactions to men and women, that is, once we have categorized someone as a male or female, '...our gender

constructs come into play, providing us with judgemental standards against which to compare a person in forming impression about their masculinity and femininity' (Smith, 1985 : 28).

In relation to this, research has shown that society plays an important part on the social function of the language (Frank and Anshen, 1983; <http://www.og.ohio-state.edu/~ohioline/hyg~fact/5000/5280.html>). In other words, language differences are due in part to our social experiences. These differences are consistently reflected in the varied social and communicative styles of men and women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been numerous studies that appear to support the idea of stylistic sex differences in conversation. One of the earliest observations made regarding this issue is that of Jespersen's, who describes in his book, **The Woman**, differences in women's compared to men's speech and voice speech. Cited in Smiths (1985 : 14), Jespersen claims that :

.....women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions.

(1922: 246).

In addition, he also claims that the periphery of language and the development of new words are only for men's speech. Jespersen relates this as

...men are wary of the language becoming insipid at the words of women; and in striving to avoid the banal, men thus become the chief renovators of language.

(in Smiths,1985 : 14).

Most of Jespersen's observations have provided some useful starting points for the study of language and relations between the sexes. Lakoff's observations (1975, 1977) on what she claims as women's language, for example, are in line with some of Jespersen's earlier theories. Similarly, she points out that the differences in speech styles between men and women are the consequences of social inequalities between the sexes; that women have been taught to be respectful and unassertive which are expressed through a variety of linguistic variables, which, in turn reflect women's place in society. In relation to this, Lakoff (1975) puts forward her ten basic assumptions on what she thinks as the characteristics of women's speech style. Lakoff

observes that in their speech, women tend to use *hedgies, (super) polite forms, tag questions, empty adjectives, hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation, special lexicon, direct quotation, and question intonation in declarative statements*. In addition, she also finds that women *speak in italic and lack sense of humour* in conversation. Lakoff further (1977) characterizes these ten basic assumptions of women's style under three main categories, namely ***Lexical Traits, Phonological Traits and Syntactic-Pragmatic Traits***. These are tabulated as in Table 1.

THE STUDY

Any written product, especially creative writing, is often seen or thought of as an individual enterprise or venture. However, most creative writings, in terms of plots, contexts and characters, are mostly created based on the writers' observations on the reality of their surroundings. It has been observed that members of most cultures and societies have certain perceptions or stereotype views of the behaviour of men and women. These perceptions may include styles in dressing, activities, career and social roles in society. All writers, to a certain extent, if not heavily, rely on these usually stereotyped and generalized observations and thus, portray these traits in their writing, for instance, in the portrayal of their characters to make their written products believable, real and effective.

In addition, the stereotype view of gender characteristics in the society is also portrayed by the differences in ways of communicating between men and women. Thus, speech characteristics that are often associated with either men or women are often crafted by authors in their stories to make the fictitious characters seem real and acceptable to the audience besides other descriptions such as activities and social roles.

However, most of the examinations of male and female speech have been conducted primarily based on real life conversations that are unprepared and spontaneous (Zimmerman, 1978; Frank, 1983; Coates, 1986; Tannen, 1991; Githens, 1991). There has been little information about male and female speech as portrayed in literary texts.

This study is a focus on the analysis of stereotyped characteristics of male and female speech styles as portrayed in American and Malaysian literary texts. Since most of the empirical studies done in this area are based on the western perceptions of male and female speech, this study will also examine the portrayal of these perceptions in Eastern literacy, namely Malaysian.

Table 1. Three Categories of women's speech style.

SPEECH CHARACTERISTICS	EXAMPLES
<p>LEXICAL TRAITS Special Lexicon <i>(elaborated use of vocabulary when defining certain objects or situations)</i></p>	<p><i>purplish-blue, itsy-bitsy, teeny-Weeny</i></p>
<p>Imprecise Intensifiers <i>(emphasizers which have general heightening effect on making the statement stronger)</i></p>	<p><i>so, much, divine, gorgeous, lovely, adorable, around, about, more or less</i></p>
<p>Polite Forms <i>(sharing respect for the person to whom one is talking to by using softening devices)</i></p>	<p><i>Would you mind..., I'd appreciate it if..., If you don't mind..., Please...</i></p>
<p>Expletives <i>(words used to express emotions)</i></p>	<p>Strong Expletives – <i>damn, I'll be damned, Shit..</i> Weak Expletives – <i>Oh dear, My goodness,...</i></p>
<p>PHONOLOGICAL TRAITS Hypercorrect Grammar & Pronunciation</p>	<p><i>The use of traditional English grammar, clear enunciation, the use of 'charming' foreign accents)</i></p>
<p>SYNTACTIC-PRAGMATIC TRAITS Hedges <i>(using lexical items indicating uncertainty and politeness)</i></p>	<p>modal auxiliary – <i>may, might' could</i> modal adverbs – <i>perhaps, may be, possibly,</i> qualifying adjectives – <i>so, very</i> egocentric sequences – <i>I believe, I think...</i></p>
<p>Tag Questions <i>(a question added at the end of a sentence)</i></p>	<p><i>She likes you, <u>doesn't she?</u></i> <i>She's the one, <u>right?</u></i></p>
<p>Direct Quotations <i>(a repetition of speech [of words previously said by another person])</i></p>	<p><i>"She was angry and shouted at me : <u>'You are a bad girl!'</u>"</i></p>

Methodology

Design of the Study

This study is qualitative in nature. Since the purpose of this study is to examine the speech styles of men and women as portrayed by writers in literary texts, this study employed a text analysis method involving two novels, 'The Great Gatsby' and 'Salina'. It is also a deductive study; begins with hypotheses or theories, then searches for evidence to support them. This study is based on Lakoff's and several other researchers' hypotheses on the gender differences in the conversations and then examines whether the claims and hypotheses are illustrated in the selected literary texts.

Data Collection

Two novels were selected in this study, namely, an American novel, 'The Great Gatsby', written by F Scott Fitzgerald, and a Malaysian novel, 'Salina' by A Samad Said. This novel is also selected because there are some similarities with the Malaysian novel, 'Salina'. Both 'The Great Gatsby' and 'Salina' were written by male writers. In addition, the stories were set after the World War I and II, hence, the war was a persistent echo throughout the novels. The novels also depict the male dominated world where men were seen as powerful and women were the weaker sex. However, there had been changes that took place in terms of social institutions, economic expansions, workplace and education.

Data Analysis

In analysing the male and female speech styles in the literary texts, a checklist of the conversational styles was formed. This checklist, which consisted of all the criteria and styles highlighted in this study, was adapted from Lakoff's categories of speech styles. For the purpose of the analysis, the above characteristics were tabulated as in table 2.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 3 summarizes the finding of this study. The results of the analyses of speech styles portrayed by the writers in 'The Great Gatsby' and 'Salina' present several interesting conclusions. The features in the checklist, that is, *special lexicon*, *adjectives*, *super polite forms*, *expletives*, *hedges*, *tag questions* and *direct quotations*; have been perceived by previous researchers to be associated specifically to female speech styles. However, the findings show that although the analysed speeches do exhibit the features mentioned, they are not exclusively used by one gender. The

findings from the analysis of both the American and Malaysian novels illustrate that both male and female characters are portrayed to use the speech stylistic features.

Table 2. Checklist Sheet.

Novel : _____ Excerpt: _____

Characteristics	Male	Examples	Female	Examples
A. LEXICAL TRAITS				
1. Special Lexicon				
2. Adjectives				
3. Super Polite Forms				
4. Expletives				
B. SYNTACTIC – PRAGMATIC TRAITS				
1. Hedges				
2. Tag Questions				
3. Direct Quotations				

Table 3. The results of the study.

Characteristics	The Great Gatsby		Salina	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Special Lexicon	/	/	/	/
Adjectives	/	/	/	/
Super Polite Forms	/	/	/	/
Expletives	/	/	/	/
Hedges	/	/	/	/
Tag Questions	/	/	/	/
Direct Quotations	X	/	/	/

* / - portrayed in the novel

X – not portrayed in the novel

In ‘The Great Gatsby’, the results of the study illustrate that only three out of the seven listed features: *special lexicon*, *adjectives or intensifiers* and *expletives*, are portrayed to have been used in the text by the female characters. However, as for the other features, it seems that all speakers, regardless of sex or gender, use them in comparable ways. These findings indicate that these characteristics of gender speech

styles cannot be generalized as the characteristics of female's speech only. The writer, himself, when writing the speech does not portray these perceptions in his writing.

Meanwhile, in 'Salina', none of the features seems to be exclusively male or female speech. The findings in this Malaysian context also indicate that gender is not a factor affecting the speech behaviour. All the evidence appears to contradict the earliest claims on this subject. This suggests that the results from the studies of male and female speech styles investigated in the west, cannot be generalized in all contexts or background.

There are many factors that may contribute to the findings of this study. First, the roles of women in both societies have changed. Women are no longer seen as the weaker sex. They are seen as equals to men. The education received may also change their worldview, thus, affecting their conversational styles. Furthermore, the need to survive after the war may also have shaped the way they speak. This seems to verify Jespersen's (1922) prediction that "the social changes taking place at the time may eventually modify even the linguistic relations of the two sexes" (<http://www.georgetown.edu/bassr/githens/otto/1922.htm>).

Second, the structure of the language used itself need to be examined carefully. For example, the nature of the Malay colloquial language may not be ex[ressive as the English Language. This may have affected the results of the study.

In addition, only several features of the speech styles are examined. These features are not adequate to determine the styles that belong to a stereotype gender. Several other features like the length of speech by a speaker, interruptions done by a speaker and the domination of the conversation by a speaker, are also significant features that need to be considered.

CONCLUSION

It is reasonably fair to suggest that the findings in the study do not really conform to the claims made by earlier studies. The hypothesis and assumptions made on the gender differences in conversation seems to have arisen from prejudices in social behaviour and representation. As Tavard (1977: 36) suspects that "...much denunciation of sexist language in others reveals the bias of the hearer rather than the speaker." This could support the findings of this study that the gender of the speaker (s) is not a major determinant of speech behavioural styles.

Having looked at the results of this study and the factors that may have affected the use of the speech style features, it can be concluded that this study is similar to Eckert's view (1989:253) that :

...gender does not have a uniform effect on linguistic behaviour for the community as a whole, across variables, or for the matter for any individual. Gender, like ethnicity and class and indeed age, is a social construction and may enter into any of a variety of interactions with other social phenomena. And although sociolinguists have had some success in perceiving the social practice that constitutes class, they have yet to think of gender in terms of social practice.

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