



Exploring gender as a cultural component of language and its effect on people's thoughts and behaviors

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 1 December 2011;

Received in revised form:

2 January 2012;

Accepted: 13 January 2012;

Keywords

Social/ cultural aspects of language;

Discourse;

Language and thought;

Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis

(LRH);

Gender.

ABSTRACT

Human beings use language both to communicate with others and to monitor their internal thoughts. Harley (2001) mentions that "in some form or another, language so dominates our social and cognitive activity that it would be difficult to imagine what life would be without it". The complexity of language has led to a wide range of methods to study such a kind of phenomenon. The study of relationship between language and thought has often been examined using cross-cultural studies of languages. Language affects much of our lives and covers a wide variety of topic areas, such as speech, writing, reading, etc. Language seems to have some effects on our perception of others. There are also great differences in the use of any one language within a culture, and the way we speak reflects our cultural and social backgrounds. The social and cultural aspects of language include *social class*, *ethnic background* and *gender*. The role of gender on the way how people think and behave is the main focus of the present study which will be discussed in detail.

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Introduction

Using language is one of the main features which differentiate human beings from animals. Language is a vital part of every human culture and is a powerful social tool that we master at an early age. Our ability to solve complex problems is the second feature of human beings. Although some animals are capable of solving simple problems, none of them are capable of solving the problems that needs to think about them. For centuries philosophers have questioned whether these two abilities are related and, if so, what the nature of the relationship between language and thought is. Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (LRH) mentions the language we use affects the way we think. There are many differences in the use of any kind of language within a culture, and the way we speak reflects our cultural and social background. There are variations of language that are caused by a range of factors such as class, gender, ethnic background, geographical region, and age. In addition the language we use is not fixed and we tend to use different styles of language to suit the situation. For example, students will use different language when they are out with their friends and their parents than when discussing an issue with their teachers, switching from an informal to a more formal style. Or in an academic situation scholars may use different languages when addressing a group of students in contrast to delivering a lecture in an international conference.

Many scholars have urged that large differences in language lead to large differences in experience and thought. They hold that each language embodies a worldview, with quite different languages embodying quite different views, so that speakers of different languages think about the world in quite different ways. This view is sometimes called the *Whorf hypothesis* or the *Whorf-Sapir hypothesis* (1956), after the linguists who made it famous. But the label *linguistic relativity*, which is more common today, has the advantage that makes it easier to separate the hypothesis from the details of Whorf's views, which

are an endless subject of exegetical dispute (Gumperz and Levinson 1996). The suggestion that different languages divide the world into different ways, and as a result their speakers think about it differently has a certain appeal. In Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity, the grammatical and semantic categories of each language, in addition to serving as instruments for communicating people's thoughts, mold ideas and program mental activity.

Thus, people with different native languages will not have the same view of the universe. It means if their languages are structurally very different, they may even have difficulty communicating about certain topics.

For example, if one language has several different words for some closely related objects and another language refers to these objects by a single word, then the speaker of the first language must note perceptually the characteristics that distinguish the objects, whereas the speaker of the second language need not.

In this way, according to Whorf, the speakers do not have the same mental picture of the objects. In the English language there is only one word for snow; in the Inuit (Eskimo) language there are several.

The speaker of Inuit is required to note distinctions, for example, whether the snow is falling or on the ground, while the speaker of English need note these distinctions only if the occasion arises. Similarly, Whorf argued that grammatical categories such as tense and number also force speakers to perceive the world in particular ways.

So, if we believe that people who speak different languages, they have different customs and ideas which it raises the question that do different languages lead to different ways of thinking? It is important to keep in mind that we cannot use language without thinking about what we want to say. So, in adults at least, language and thought seem closely related.

The Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis (LRH)

The LRH proposes that language influences the way people perceive and think about the world. This hypothesis concentrates on the differences in both vocabulary and grammar between different languages and suggests that speakers of a particular language are led to think, perceive and remember the world in a way specific to that language. Users of different languages will therefore tend to view the world differently. The theory is often traced back to the work of the linguist Sapir (1929) who compared English to a number of Native American languages. He concluded that the differences between the languages changed the way people perceive their environments. However, the LRH has become most closely associated with the work of Whorf (1956). He was another linguist who studied Native American languages and he became convinced that the differences between languages determined the types of thought people were able to have. The theory is referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or sometimes because of the greater influence of Whorf's ideas, the Whorfian hypothesis.

Psychologists have recognized that there are at least two versions of the LRH which differ in emphasis and implications. These two versions of the hypothesis have been labeled 'strong' and 'weak'.

a) The 'strong' version is that language *determines* thought.

b) The 'weak' version is that language *influences* thought.

Therefore the strong version suggests that the language we speak determines the nature of our thoughts, including the types of ideas and concepts we are able to have. It says that thoughts that are possible in one language may not be possible in another. The weak version, on the other hand, suggests that language has a more ingenious effect on thought and only influences what we are likely to perceive or remember about an object. If you have a word for something in your language you are more likely to recognize and remember it than someone who uses a language that does not have a word for it.

Gender and its relationship with language variations

In recent years there has been growing interest in gender differences in language. These differences affect both the content and the style of language used and have been called *genderlect* (Owens, 2001). These differences start early and by the age of 4 to 5 children's language starts to reflect the gender differences found in adults (Haas, 1975). This is not surprising as the style of parental speech to infants varies according to gender from a very early age (Owens, 2001). For example, fathers tend to use more commands to boys and use more insulting terms to them than they do to girls (Berko Gleason and Greif, 1983). This is reflected in the differences in male to male and male to female adult conversations. According to Tannen (1994) there are more similarities than differences in language and that any analysis of gender and language styles has to take account of cultural background.

Gender, Discourse, and Language choice

Speakers often have a repertoire of social identities and discourse community membership. They may also have a linguistic repertoire that they draw on for their linguistic interactions. That is, they may have a number of languages they use to interact in their particular communities. The choice of language may be determined by the domain the language is being used in, such as with family, among friends, and in religious, educational and employment settings. Social factors such as who we are speaking to, the social context of the interaction, the topic, function and goal of the interaction, social distance between speakers, the formality of the setting or type of

interaction and the status of each of the speakers are also important for accounting for the language choice that a person makes in these kinds of settings (Holmes, 2001). The use of slang among teenagers in Singapore illustrates a deliberate choice in the use of a language variety to communicate with each other as well as to signal a particular group membership. In an article in the Singapore Sunday Times titled 'So steady pom pi pi', Tan (2005) discusses how teenagers in Singapore use slang in their speech as a way of bonding with their friends and to ensure their conversations will remain private.

Considering gender as one of the main issues regarding the relationship between language and thought, it will be appropriate to explain the relationship between discourse and gender. Weatherall (2002: 102) explains gender 'is not just a natural and inevitable consequence of one's sex'. It is, rather, 'part of the routine, ongoing work of everyday, mundane, social interaction'; that is, 'the product of social practice' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 5). Swann (2002: 47) also has pointed out:

Gender as a social category has come to be seen as highly fluid, or less well defined than it once appeared. In line with gender theory more generally, researchers interested in language and gender have focused increasingly on plurality and diversity amongst female and male language users, and on gender as performativity- something that is 'done' in context, rather than a fixed attribute.

Concerning how gender issues are represented in different films, Lehman and Luhr (2008: 274) explained that 'We have different expectations about the roles of men and women when we see different kinds of movies. For example action films have traditionally meant male action. With the exception of a few fleeting appearances, women characters are absent from male war films such as *Jarhead* (2005). Walter Hill, a director of male action films (*48 Hourse*, 1982, and *Red Heat*, 1988), has made several films in which women barely appear. Aside from a waitress in the opening scene, there is not even a minor female character in *Trespass* (1992), which is devoted to male action in an abandoned, inner-city building. In *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), we glimpse Native American women only in the background of a few shots. "Geronimo is here" is the only line spoken by a woman, and she remains unidentified as she introduces the legendary chief to another warrior'. Presenting some other films such as *Aliens* (1986), *Terminator 2* (1991) by James Cameron; and Renny Harlin in *Cutthroat Island* (1995) and *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) which try to place women at the center of the genre are highly noticeable; because most of people were not used to women wielding sword or high-powered automatic weapons and vanquishing the enemy in action films, Lehman and Luhr (2008) mention that most of these films show that men and women are not represented equally in the films and that these representations are open to change.

What do we mean by sexism in language?

Sexism in language is a different issue in exploring the relationship between language and gender. It is argued that the way language is used (by both men and women) can promote stereotyped views of gender and present males as the most important sex. Spender (1990) argues that language is man-made and promotes male dominance. She suggests that 'males, as the dominant group, have produced language, thought and reality' (p. 143). For example, students learning subjects such as science or social science, where the term 'man' was used to represent humans, tended to have an image of a male not male and female. Thus the language used promotes a perception that males are the most important sex. Spender's arguments are very

similar to the weak version of the LRH since she argues that language influences our perception and memory of the world.

Differences according to gender

Lakoff (1975) proposed what she called 'women's language'; that is, a use of language that is different from 'men's language' or what she called 'neutral language'. This language included features such as the use of overly polite forms, the use of question tags, rising intonation in declaratives, the avoidance of expletives, a greater use of diminutives and euphemisms, the use of more hedges and mitigating devices, more indirectness and the use of particular vocabulary items such as 'adorable', 'charming' and 'sweet' (women's language) versus 'great', 'terrific' and 'cool' (men's language). Lakoff (1975) argued that this use of language, made women's language tentative and coupled with the use of demeaning and trivializing terms for women, works to keep women in their place in society. She claims that these differences were the result of men's dominance over women. She presented two views of women's language in her book, the dominance approach and the difference (cultural) approach. Difference approach focuses on the distribution of power in society and argues that women's language reflects women's subordinate position in society and persists to keep them in that position (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

West and Zimmerman (1983) argued that men deny equal status to women in conversation and that linguistic gestures of power are an integral part of women's placement in the social scheme of things. Concerning the difference approach Tannen (1990) argued that boys and girls live in different subcultures in the way that people from different social and ethnic backgrounds might be described as being part of different subcultures. So, boys and girls grow up learning different ways of using language and communicating with people in other cultural groups. Cameron (1998: 451) in a critique of both the dominance and difference approaches of language and gender, argues that expressions of gender and power are always context-specific and need to be understood in relation to who the person is speaking to 'from what position and for what purpose' is what the use of language means in terms of the relationship between the speakers in a particular situation.

Communication styles are always a product of context, so gender differences tend to be most pronounced in single-gender groups. One explanation is that people accommodate their language towards the style of the person they are interacting with. Thus, in a mixed-gender group, gender differences tend to be less pronounced. A similarly important observation is that this accommodation is usually towards the language style, not the gender of the person (Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001). That is, a polite and empathic male will tend to be accommodated to on the basis of their being polite and empathic, rather than their being male.

Cameron and Kulick (2003: 57) argue that 'the relationship between language and gender is almost always indirect, mediated by something else'. The ways that people speak are associated with particular roles, activities and personality traits such as being a mother, student, worker, etc.

Minimal responses

One of the ways in which the communicative competence of men and women differ is in their use of minimal responses, i.e., paralinguistic features such as 'mhm' and 'yeah', which is behavior associated with collaborative language use (Carli, 1990). Men, on the other hand, generally use them less frequently and where they do, it is usually to show agreement, as

Zimmerman and West's (1975) study of turn-taking in conversation indicates.

Questions

Men and women differ in their use of questions in conversations. For men, a question is usually a genuine request for information whereas with women it can often be a rhetorical means of engaging the other's conversational contribution or of acquiring attention from others conversationally involved, techniques associated with a collaborative approach to language use (Barnes, 1971). Therefore women use questions more frequently (Fitzpatrick, et al., 1995; Todd, 1983). In writing, however, both genders use rhetorical questions as literary devices. For example, Mark Twain used them in "A War Prayer" to provoke the reader to question his actions and beliefs.

Turn-taking

As the work of DeFrancisco (1991) shows, female linguistic behavior characteristically encompasses a desire to take turns in conversation with others, which is opposed to men's tendency towards centering on their own point or remaining silent when presented with such implicit offers of conversational turn-taking as are provided by hedges such as "y' know" and "isn't it". This desire for turn-taking gives rise to complex forms of interaction in relation to the more controlled form of turn-taking commonly exhibited by men (Sacks et al., 1974).

Changing the topic of conversation

According to Dorval (1990), in his study of same-sex friend interaction, males tend to change subject more frequently than females. This difference may well be at the root of the conception that women chatter and talk too much, and may still trigger the same thinking in some males. In this way lowered estimation of women may arise. Incidentally, this androcentric attitude towards women as chatterers arguably arose from the idea that any female conversation was too much talking according to the patriarchal consideration of silence as a womanly virtue common to many cultures.

Self-disclosure

Female tendencies toward self-disclosure, i.e., sharing their problems and experiences with others, often to offer sympathy (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Tannen, 1991:49), contrasts with male tendencies to non-self disclosure and professing advice or offering a solution when confronted with another's problems.

Verbal aggression

Men tend to be more verbally aggressive in conversing (Labov, 1972), frequently using threats, profanities, yelling and name-calling. Women, on the whole, deem this to disrupt the flow of conversation and not as a means of upholding one's hierarchical status in the conversation. Where women swear, it is usually to demonstrate to others what is normal behavior for them.

Listening and attentiveness

It appears that women attach more weight than men to the importance of listening in conversation, with its connotations of power to the listener as confidant of the speaker. This attachment of import by women to listening is inferred by women's normally lower rate of interruption — i.e., disrupting the flow of conversation with a topic unrelated to the previous one (Fishman, 1980) — and by their largely increased use of minimal responses in relation to men (Zimmerman and West, 1975). Men, however, interrupt far more frequently with non-related topics, especially in the mixed sex setting (Zimmerman and West, 1975) and, far from rendering a female speaker's responses minimal, are apt to greet her conversational spotlights with silence, as the work of DeFrancisco (1991) demonstrates.

Dominance versus subjection

This, in turn, suggests a dichotomy between a male desire for conversational dominance – noted by Leet-Pellegrini (1980) with reference to male experts speaking more verbosely than their female counterparts – and a female aspiration to group conversational participation. One corollary of this is, according to Coates (1993: 202), that males are afforded more attention in the context of the classroom and that this can lead to their gaining more attention in scientific and technical subjects, which in turn can lead to their achieving better success in those areas, ultimately leading to their having more power in a technocratic society.

Politeness

Politeness in speech is described in terms of positive and negative face. *Positive face* refers to one's desire to be liked and admired, while *negative face* refers to one's wish to remain autonomous and not to suffer imposition. Both forms, according to Brown's study of the Tzeltal language (1980), are used more frequently by women whether in mixed or single-sex pairs, suggesting for Brown a greater sensitivity in women than have men to face the needs of others. In short, women are to all intents and purposes largely more polite than men. However, negative face politeness can be potentially viewed as weak language because of its associated hedges and tag questions, a view propounded by O'Barr and Atkins (1980) in their work on courtroom interaction.

Conclusion

It would be appropriate to wrap up the raised issues to reach a conclusion by what Chaika (1989: 2) explains. "Language and society are so intertwined that it is impossible to understand one without the other. There is no human society that does not depend on, is not shaped by, and does not itself shape language". This statement exactly defines the relationship between language, thought and reality for language not only shapes the way reality is perceived but reality can also shape language. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has also changed the way many people look at language. While many like Sapir and Whorf support the notion that language strongly influences thought and others argue that language does not influence thought, the evidence from research indicates that language does influence thought and perception of reality but language does not govern thought or reality. Social and cultural factors such as social class, ethnic background and gender affect the language itself and the way we think on the other hand. Exploring the role of *gender* was the main focus of the present study, so we tried to shed more light on gender differences and its effects on language and thought. Gender differences in the use of language start in childhood and these differences affect both the content and the conversational style of speech. As Lakoff believes that women are socialized into using a style of speech that lacks authority and this reflects the inequalities between the sexes in society. This has been criticized as stereotypical and a negative view of women's language. Tannen suggests that women and men use two different styles of language, both equally valid. Reviewing all of these issues, we conclude that gender plays an important role on the ways people (men/ women) think, behave, talk, teach, learn, and etc. in their society.

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