Lexical and Syntactic Features of Men's and Women's Language

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Abstract. *The problems of gender linguistics are the most attractive ones in the modern language study. This is an obviously new branch of science which studies out the focus on difference of means of language between men and women. And not only language but behavior itself. The article constituted a response to male-centered cognitive studies, which had taken modes of thinking associated with dominant men as the norm and appraised the cognitive processes of females. The aim of the research is to study out gender peculiarities in usage the language by two genders (phonology, grammar, morphology, syntax), and the difference between men's and women's way of speaking, writing, behavior, etc.*

Key words: *gender, phonology, syntax, lexicon, language units, morphemes, syntactic alternatives.*

Introduction

We use the term *lexicon* to refer to the inventory of lexical morphemes and words in a language. The lexicon is a repository of cultural preoccupations, and as a result the link between gender and the lexicon is deep and extensive. The lexicon is also the most changeable part of language and an important site for bringing in new ideas. Because lexical items have content in different domains, different language users have access to somewhat different lexicons: linguists have their specialized terminology, and young pop music fans have theirs. The gendered division of labor is likely to produce gendered patterns in the precise lexical inventories speakers can access [1, p.35].

Grammatical morphemes like pronouns are more stable than lexical nouns or verbs, and come and go only very slowly (though they can and do change). The traces in a grammar of gender such as we discussed in the preceding section may reflect more the preoccupations of earlier eras than they do the culture of those currently using a particular language. Marks of gender in the lexicon are often more complex and multilayered than those found in gender morphology.

The lexicon is also a resource that different speakers may use differently as a function of gender. Not only will women be more likely to know words like *gusset* and *selvage* (from the domain of sewing) and men more likely to know words like *torque* and *tachometer* (from mechanics), there are also gender-linked norms for using certain lexical items. For example, men are expected to use profanity more than women, and they are expected not to use profanity around women. And there are in fact gendered differences in how and when people use this "taboo" part of the lexicon - but not precisely the differences dictated by prescriptive norms. The retired people all claimed that their mothers had hardly used any profanity at all, while their fathers used very little. The high-school students, on the other hand, showed a sex difference in their observations - girls' reports of their mothers' swearing outdistanced that of boys. In other words, boys' views of their mothers conformed more than girls' to gender norms. Gary Selnow found a similar difference in reports of the use of sexual, religious, and excretory profanity among college students in the US. Both men and women reported that their fathers swore more than their mothers, but the women's

estimates of their mothers' swearing were significantly higher than the men's.

Some gender indices are not grammatically obligatory, but are available when speakers wish to specify gender, such as *lady doctor, male nurse.* In this case, the speaker is not just indexing gender, but also invoking the presupposition that doctors are normally male and that nurses are normally female. While obligatory indices such as pronouns invoke male and female categories, optional ones such as these can invoke the content of these categories. And in invoking this content, the use of such devices serves to reinforce, or reproduce, the connection between gender and profession.

In English, we have masculine generics *(every man for himself)*, pairs of words that reflect the social asymmetry of male and female (e.g. *master/mistress, fox/vixen, bachelor/spinster),* and even gender attributed to things (boats are *she).* But these meanings do not just appear in language; they come to be embedded in language through generations of use. And eventually some of them disappear from the language, or are modified, once again through changes in use. Political attitudes have been consciously pushing masculine generics out of use for several decades; and the term *mistress* is quietly falling out of use because the category of woman who is "kept" by a man she is not married to is losing relevance in the twenty-first century as the gender order itself changes.

Syntax combines words into sentences – linguistic structures that express thoughts or propositions. Sentences describe events or situations and syntax indicates something about relations among the participants in those events or situations. For example, *Joan kissed John* and *John kissed Joan* are two sentences with exactly the same words. The difference in what they mean is indicated syntactically. In the first, it is Joan who initiates the kiss whereas John plays that role in the second. Joan is the subject of the first sentence and John is the object; those syntactic relations are reversed in the second sentence. With *kiss* and many other verbs, the subject in an active sentence is the star actor in the event whereas the object simply receives the action initiated by the subject. Linguists often say that the subject in such sentences plays the role of *agent,* and the object plays the role of *theme.* There is nothing inherently gendered about these syntactically-indicated meanings, but we find many English-language texts (e.g. primary school readers in the 1970s and syntax texts in the 1990s) in which most of the agents or doers are men or boys, whereas women and girls, if present at all, are often themes to which things happen [2, p.798]. Here the gendered meaning does not really come from single sentences but from more general discourse patterns, which we will discuss in the next section.

Syntax provides multiple ways to describe the same events: for example the passive sentences *John was kissed by Joan* or *Joan was kissed by John* express basically the same content as the active sentences above. The subject in these passive sentences is playing the theme role and the agent has been demoted to a prepositional phrase. In fact, the agent may be missing altogether from passives in English and many other languages. So-called *agentless passives* can be very useful if the agent is unknown or is not relevant for the purposes at hand. For example, if we're only interested in the age of the house *the house was built in 1908* will do just fine. Linguist Julia Penelope suggests, however, that agentless passives are often used to deflect attention from male oppression of women [3, p.84]. The report *she was raped* does not mention the rapist and, especially if coupled with a description of the revealing shirt and tight jeans she was wearing, may help shift the blame from the male rapist to the raped woman. When the content of a sentence has connections to gender or sexuality, syntactic choices may not only signal something about gender ideology but may also play some role in maintaining certain features of the gender order. This doesn't mean that the syntax itself maps directly into social meaning. The point is that messages about gender draw not just on the words used but on the syntactic structures in which they occur. Syntactic alternatives provide ways of conveying essentially the same message – describing the same situation or event from different perspectives or with different emphases. Like other linguistic choices, they can help color messages with gender ideology.

Syntactic and related morphological choices can also help color speakers, entering into gender performance in a variety of ways. One way in which this happens is in the opposition

between "standard" and "nonstandard" grammar. Many speakers of English can choose between simple and multiple negatives, as in the Standard English *I didn't do anything* and the Nonstandard *I didn't do nothing.* The latter sentence has two negatives, but the second negative does not cancel the first. Rather the two negatives reinforce one another much as when one says *five cats* the *five* and the plural -s both convey more than one. In French, multiple negatives that reinforce each other are quite standard. For example, in *je ne sais pas* 'I don't know' both underlined elements are negative but the English gloss has just one negative. At earlier periods, all varieties of English had reinforcing multiple negatives like French. The propositional meaning of the two English sentences above is the same, but the former is associated with education and, more generally, with middle-class status while the latter is associated with lack of education and with working-class speech. This opposition is central to language ideology, and relates in complex ways to gender ideology.

Other sets of syntactic alternatives may suggest slightly different stances towards what is said. A parent may ask a child about progress with homework using any of three syntactic alternatives: "have you done your homework?" or "you haven't done your homework, have you?" or "'you've done your homework, haven't you?" All of these query the same proposition, but the second and third also signal clear assumptions about the answer. While there is nothing in the differences among these forms that directly signals gender, it is possible that gender affects the ways in which people do such things as ask their children about their homework. And there are many subtler distinctions associated with syntactic choices that we will discuss later.

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