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Gender Construction in Situated Discourse: A Case Study of Teacher Learner Interaction

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Abstract

The question of identifying and interpreting possible differences in linguistic styles between males and females has exercised linguistic researchers for decades (Trudgill 1972, Lakoff 1975). It has been argued for some time that some consistent differences exist in speech, although the interpretation of such differences remains somewhat elusive. It is for this reason that I examine gender construction in a situated discourse in light of the difference and social constructionist theories of gender. I use a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to investigate gender differences in language within a context of a teacher learner interaction. The results show that a man can display aspects of linguistic behaviour traditionally seen as being feminine and vice versa; thus failing to support the difference theory and provide preliminary evidence for the social constructionist theory.

Keywords: *gender; social construction; difference; teacher; student.*

Introduction

Men and women have long been in dispute over things such as spending, emotions, division of labour, and male withdrawal during conflict. One of the factors that may contribute to the continuation of such disputes is language differences between the two genders. Two competing theories have evolved to explain language differences between men and women: the difference theory and the social constructionist theory. Because social psychologists have traditionally studied both decontextualised, mechanical features of language and isolated the individual from the social context (Coates & Johnson, 2001), language and gender research provides little empirical evidence supporting the social constructionist theory (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003) which makes the difference theory the most cited and accepted theory

by default. The current study tests predictions made by the two theories using critical discourse analysis of interaction between a male teacher and two female students. The results thus contribute empirical evidence to the gender and language debate.

Currently, results from gender and language research are inconsistent as exemplified by the research on gender and interruptions. Evidence suggests that men are more likely to interrupt women and overlap women's speech during conversations than the reverse (Tannen 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1983). On the other hand, other researches indicate no gender differences in interruptions (Aries, 1996) or insignificant differences (Anderson & Leaper, 1998). Basing on a teacher learner interaction with the aid of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a tool, I approach this problem (inconsistency in gender and language) by testing the difference and social constructionist theories (Bergvall, 1999; Coates & Johnson, 2001; Leaper & Smith, 2004). These two theories are the dominant theories by which researchers define the construct of gender.

The study has the primary goal of finding out if a male, in discourse, can display aspects of linguistics behaviour traditionally seen as being feminine; or if a female can exhibit traditional masculine linguistics traits. This is informed by the assertion that the differences in the cultures of boys and girls cause differences in male-female communication (Maltz and Borker, (1998); and the counter assertion that language and communication are integrally tied to the context in which they occur (Coates and Johnson 2001), and that context can create, erase, or reverse gender differences (Hyde 2005).

Review of Previous Scholarship on Language and Gender

This section reviews literature that relates to the study. It reviews work on the concept gender, gender and language, and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Gender has been used within Anglo-Saxon discourse to stand for the social, cultural and psychological meaning imposed upon biological sexual identity (Elaine 1989 cited in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997). It is not natural or biological category which is unchanging over time and across cultural. Rather it is socially constructed: it arises and is transformed in history, and itself transforms history (Amott and Matthaeil 1991). The concept gender makes it possible to

distinguish the biologically founded sexual differences between women and men from the culturally determined differences between the roles given to or undertaken by women and men respectively in a given society. That is the gender differences in the social lives of men and women are based on, but are not the same thing as, biological differences between the sexes. Thus, gender is different from sex. Sex is understood as a person's biological maleness or femaleness, while gender refers to the non-physiological aspects of sex, a group of attributes and or behaviours shaped by society and culture that are defined as appropriate for the male sex or the female sex (Amott and Matthaeil (1991). There is no biological reason, for example, why women wear particular dresses different from men; or why women and men are fond of using language differently.

Initially research on language and gender focused predominantly on the linguistic usage of women (Herring 1995). This created an imbalance in that we became aware of all the details of how women spoke—their "hedges", their "umhms" and "you knows"—while how men spoke remained undiscovered (ibid). It was just 1990 that Lakoff (1990) characterised men's language as "the language of powerful: direct, clear and succinct as would be expected of those who need not fear giving offense (Lakoff 1990; 205). Herring, however, argues that "when men's language is examined closely, it reveals patterns of usage which bears little resemblance to the ideal of men as direct efficient communicators" Herring (1995:1). Rather there is an aggressive or adversarial component to male-male interaction which supersedes the goal of cooperative exchange of information and often results in violation of directness, clarity and succinctness (ibid). She describes men's language as characterised by self-promotion, rhetorical coercion and adversative; and argues that they are related in that all have a potential intimidating effect (ibid).

Lakoff (1975) also describes women's language. She coins the term "women language" and notes several features that characterise women's speech. The characteristics presented by her fall into four rough categories: lexical items, syntax, intonation and hyper-politeness features. For lexical items, Lakoff argues that women tend to use more specialized colour terms (e.g. mauve) and "empty" expressive adjectives and adverbs (e.g. quite), avoid use of swears and taboo words (e.g. dearest me as a replacement for a swear word), hedges (e.g. um, well) and intensive so (e.g. we were so happy). According to Lakoff (1975), each of these lexical items represents the relegation of women (in both their conversational topics and their linguistic forms)

to the trivial and inoffensive. In the area of syntax, Lakoff states that women use more tag questions and soften commands as requests. Lakoff claims that women use tag questions more because, as with lexical items, strong expressions by women must often be mitigated. Another example of syntactic differences that she notes is the softening of commands as requests (e.g. would you come and see me tomorrow rather than come and see me tomorrow). Combined with intonation (women tend to use rising intonation in declarative statements more than men do), and hyper-politeness, Lakoff further supports her argument that "women's language" features function to place women in a subordinate social position. Still on female linguistic features, there is a claim that women use minimal responses more often than men (Maltz and Borker 1998; Fishman 1980; Coates 1989).

Theories on Relationship between Gender and Language

I draw mainly from two versions of gender theory – difference/culture and social constructionist theories. Researchers who follow the difference approach, including Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen (1990, 1994), assert that men and women speak differently due to differences that are implemented during the socialisation process and that gender polarities exist in language use. Thus, while boys and men can argue in direct and confrontational ways (and be seen as "assertive" or "strong" by society) girls and women do so at the risk of being called "bossy" or "difficult" (Sheldon, 1997). The theory gives little regard to language individualisation (Coates & Johnson, 2001). The difference theory also assumes that gender roles are static and contextually independent. Maltza and Borker based on Gumperz's (1982) "two cultures' model for inter-ethnic communication to develop a cultural difference approach to male-female communication and miscommunication. They claim that it is the differences in the cultures of boys and girls that cause differences in male-female communication (Maltz and Borker, (1998). They propose that different conversation patterns originate in childhood (between the ages of five and fifteen) when boys and girls learn to use language differently through interacting primarily in single-sex peer group.

Debora Tannen also attributes difference in gendered language to cultural differences. Her explanation for differences is also based on the different socialisation or acculturation of boys and girls: the idea that boys and girls grow up being socialised so differently, and with

different conversational expectations, that communication between them is like communication between two cultures. Tannen's analysis of videotaped conversation between same-sex friends at different ages shows that girls communicate by sitting closely together as supporting each other through eye contact, while boys fidget and only speak at interval. She also makes a distinction between female "rapport talk" characterized by emphasis on listening and involvement, and man "report talk" also characterized by exhibiting knowledge, initiating and dominating the conversation.

Those who advocate social construct approach follow Butler's (1990) view of gender as a performative social construct as a way of avoiding gender polarisation (Mullany 2000). Instead of viewing gender as something that is rigid and fixed, serving to perpetuate stereotypes associated with male and female speech, the notion of performativity allows gender to be viewed as something which is flexible (ibid). Bell et al (2006) and Coates and Johnson (2001) suggest that language and communication are integrally tied to the context in which they occur. Several researchers conclude that gender differences in language may be better described as gender preferential than gender exclusive because of the capabilities of both males and females to use various linguistic strategies and features within different contexts (Anderson & Leaper, 1998; Fitzpatrick, Mulac, & Dinidia, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1983). Fitzpatrick et al (1995) go further to suggest interaction context as a better predictor of interaction style than gender. Also, according to Hyde (2005), context can create, erase, or reverse gender differences.

Data Collection

The data upon which the study is based were derived from an interaction between a male teacher (MT) and two female students (FSA and FSB) in Toase Senior high School, a public senior high school in Ashanti Region, Ghana. When the research went to the school, he learned that the teacher was due to interview some of the school girls as part of an ongoing investigation of alleged forcible entry into the girls' dormitory by the townsfolk who came to the school to play football.

As a sign of courtesy, the researcher first negotiated with the teacher to record the interview. It was also agreed that it would be recorded without the students' knowledge. To achieve this, the researcher first sat on the tape recorder at the school's staff common room

ostensibly working on it. The teacher then came with the students and sat beside the researcher and began the interview with them; meanwhile the researcher had clicked on the recording button of the tape. My presence did not in any way intimidate the students because of my status as a former teacher of the school – both students knew me. The teacher's knowledge of the recording also did not affect the findings because he did not know the linguistic features I would be looking for. After the data collection, the researcher transcribed it from spoken form to written text.

Method of Data Analysis

I relied mainly on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse the data. According to van Dijk (1998) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a field that is concerned with studying and analysing written and spoken texts to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias. It examines how these discursive sources are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political and historical contexts. In a similar vein, Fairclough (1993) defines CDA as discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (p. 135).

To put it simply, CDA aims at making transparent the connections between discourse practices, social practices, and social structures, connections that might be opaque to the layperson.

One central assumption of CDA is that speakers make choices regarding vocabulary and grammar, and that these choices are consciously or unconsciously "principled and systematic" (Fowler et al., 1979: 188). Thus choices are ideologically based. According to Fowler et al. (1979), the "relation between form and content is not arbitrary or conventional, but . . . form signifies content" (p. 188). In sum, language is a social act and it is ideologically driven. Among the scholars whose works have profoundly contributed to the development of CDA are van Dijk (1988, 1991, 1998), Wodak (1995, 1996), and Fairclough (1992, 1993, 1995).

Data Analysis

This section reports and discusses the use of linguistic behaviour traditionally seen as being feminine or masculine. Some of such linguistic behaviours discussed are interruption, the use of minimal responses and backchannel indicators. Basing on Van Dijk model, the researcher uses Critical Discourse Analysis as a tool.

Though the text was not properly introduced yet it shows that it was an interview discourse. There are turn-takings and many instances of overlapping and interruptions. For the purpose of this study, overlapping is taken as interruption.

At the linguistic level (specifically analysis of the properties of the genre) the text is replete with interruptions as already noted above. Out of 253 turn-takings, as many as 88 were interrupted. The data shows that among the three. (FSA) interrupted the most. This directly contradicts Tanner (1994) assertion that "men more frequently interrupt women than vice versa, thus contravening the difference theory and upholding the social constructionist theory. It therefore confirms the question — can a female student exhibit aspect of linguistic behaviour traditionally seen as masculine? Another property of the genre also noted is the use of minimal responses (mmhh/umhm). Surprisingly, the MT does that more than the female students. He does so 34 times while FSB does that 2 times and FSA not at all. This also challenges the difference model; because the researchers who follow the difference model are in unanimity that females rather than males are fond of using minimal responses/backchannels (Tannen, 1994; Maltz and Borker, 1998; Lakoff, 1975).

The table below illustrates the usage of interruptions and minimal responses.

	Interruptions		**Minimal Responses**	
	Freq.	%	**Freq.**	**%**
MT	29	33.3	34	94.4
FSA	37	42.0	0	0
FSB	22	25.0	2	5.6
Total	**88**	**100**	**36**	**100**

The expressions and vocabulary used are simple. They are basically words and expression that are in everyday use. There are some instances of repetition of words. Okay for instance is repeated by the MT 16 times. He also repeats you know 12 times and well three times. The two female students do not repeat any of them. Some expressions also have either been repeated or reworded.

Example:

It is not theirs; it is part of the school. It is part of the school; the field isn't theirs.

That a male teacher, not a female student repeats okay 16 times and well 3 times confirms the question – can a male teacher display aspects of linguistic behaviour traditionally seen as being feminine – and once again contradicts the difference model claim that well and you know are females' idiolect (Lakoff, 1975, Herring, 1995).

Why the MT exhibits linguistic behaviours traditionally seen as feminine in this study is not far-fetched. Among the reasons given by the difference theorists for the difference in gendered language relates to the power men have in the society (Spender 1980; Fishman, 1983). They argue that the considerable economic power men have over women in society permeates into language, resulting in male domination in spoken interaction. It therefore follows that wherever there is power relation, the less powerful exhibits linguistic features akin to those ascribed to women; while the more powerful also exhibits features akin to those ascribed to men. In this study, teacher learner interaction, the teacher is powerful by default, but the pendulum swings at this time. It swings because in this context it is the female students who possess some information (the incident which happened at the dormitory) which the male teacher does not know and wants to get from the students. Thus the female students become "more powerful" than the male teacher just by virtue of the information they have. So the teacher has to hedge and provide the minimal responses as the student feed him with the information. There is another possible reason why the male teacher exhibits features attributable to females – minimal responses, back channelling and hedges.

According to Fishman (1980) women use these as attention getters in order to include their interlocutor in the conversation so as to keep the conversation flowing by getting the

attention of the unresponsive male. So in this context, the teacher who has special interest in the conversation – to get information about what happened in the girls' dormitory – has to provide such attention getters to make the students more responsive.

On the grammar, the text is composed of simple and complex sentences. The sentences are predominantly in active voice. One peculiar thing observed about FSA is turning statement into question thus making her unassertive.

Examples are seen in these utterances of hers.

i. Sir, why don't you report them to the king?

ii. Sir, what about reporting it to the police?

iii. Sir, why don't they go to that place to train rather than this place?

These questions by FSA could have been direct statements as the following:

i. Sir, report them to the king.

ii. Sir, we should report it to the police.

iii. Sir, they should go to that place to train rather than this place.

This is because they are answers to questions asked by the MT

The first two responses are intended to answer this question;

So what do you want to say that we should do for you so that you will be pleased and then they will not repeat it in future if you are gone?

Her third response is also intended to answer this question:

Do you have any suggestion to make?

Thus, it is argued that such responses should have been imperative or at least declarative rather than the interrogative she uses. However, such responses from a female student lend credence to the difference theory, because in the view of such theorists softening of commands as request and using rising intonation in declarative statements are syntactic features of female

language (Lakoff 1975). They claim that women are not as assertive as men, and always want to seek the consent of their interlocutors (Tannen 1994 Lakoff 1975).

Notwithstanding these, the same FSA is assertive in lines.

Sir, they should buy it.

Sir, let's call the whole school so that they will come and apologise to us.

This shows that discourse is not monolithic but rather fluid or dynamic. The same person can be assertive and unassertive in the same discourse.

5 Conclusions

The study has shown that context, rather than gender, is the major predictor of linguistic variation in discourse. That is, contrary to previous gender-related findings in sociolinguistic, the study has proved that females can interrupt in interaction more than males, while males also can supply minimal responses and back channelling in interaction more than females.

Another key finding of the study is that discourse is fluid rather than being static or monolithic Thus, the same FSA was both unassertive and assertive in the discourse.

The study also has implication on language and gender theory. It has upheld the socio construction version of gender theory as compared to the difference version. This is because both the male teacher and the female students exhibited linguistic features previously attributed to their opposite genders.

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