THEORIES OF GENDER AND POWER DIFFERENCES: A DISCUSSION

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Abstract

Early studies on gender differences in conversation focused on differences between male and female conversational styles. For nearly all of these issues of stylistic and conversational differences, there are many some contradictory findings, and it seems that one must look closely at the nature of the circumstances in order to predict how men and women will behave verbally.

This paper discusses the theories of gender and power differences namely *deficit, dominance* and *sub-cultural* as proposed by researchers in the field of language and gender. Most recent research into gender and language challenges the dominant sex-difference oriented approaches, which maintain that women are different from men, whether essentially or by socialisation (e.g., Coates, 1986). This sex-difference view either condemns women's different speech as socially dysfunctional and deficient (e.g., Lakoff, 1975), or embraces it as a 'different but equally valid' culture (e.g., Tannen, 1990). the 'different and deficient' approach is criticised for implying that, to improve their social status, individual women should transform their style, and adjust themselves to men's linguistic norms. Nevertheless, in principle, it is clear that in

many circumstances, women and men have access to the same set of linguistic and conversational devices, and tend to use them differently but for the same purposes. Apparent differences in usage reflect differences in status and in goals.

Introduction

Models of how conversation works are being continually developed and refined and feminist research has contributed important insights to this field of knowledge. Work in this area has provided useful overviews and critiques of mainstream linguistics. Many of the assumptions made by non-feminist research into gendered language use have been questioned by feminists working in this area. They have pointed out the androcentrism behind the aspects of language use selected for investigation, the groups whose language use was investigated, the methods of data collection used, and the explanation proposed for the differences found (see Coates and Cameron, 1989· 13-26). The question raised in the work of Coates and Cameron and other feminist linguists, concerning the assumptions which have been made in linguistics, are potentially a great contribution to the variety of research within the field.

Conversational Styles: Gender Differences in Discussion

The different conversational styles adopted by the males and females in their interaction with one another seem to have been largely ignored in communication research. Work by feminist researchers dealing with issues on gender differences began to appear in the mid-seventies. For instance in 1975, Kramer called for more research on sex-preferential differences in language use. Kramer states that there is a need to consider not only the possibility of differences in grammatical, phonological, and semantic aspects, but also possible differences in the verbal skills, instrumental use of language, and the relationship of non-verbal uses to verbal behaviour. According to Kramer (1975 43),

> We need to ask if there are differences between sexes in their linguistic competence. Do women control some speech structures or vocabulary that men lack or vice versa? We need to ask if here there are differences in linguistic performance. Are there syntactic structures, vocabulary, phonological rules that say, women might know but not use while men both know and use?

Kramer's questions are ones that have interested feminist sociolinguists and several attempts have also been made to answer these questions.

What is Gender?

The term gender is referred to as "a culturally shaped group of attributes given to the female or to the male" (Humm, 1989· 64). According to Humm, the 'cultural shaping' is an on going, lifelong process which means that basically *gender* is unstable and multiple or 'non-unitary' It takes place primarily through different discourses such as the discourses of male superiority, and of gender equity It is considered a changing product of a given context (e.g. public discussion), and as playing a role in constituting the social practices of that context.

Doing Gender

From birth, one gender or the other is known by dint of our genital organs and from then on we enact this gender following role models and how we are expected to behave. It is not a case of simply being male or female: we do gender through gendered activity including everything we utter and the ways we are trained to interact with others.

In the context of a hierarchical society that dictates male dominance and female subordination, regardless of our individual intentions, the way we do gender in interaction are specific, intricate and for the most part, 'invisible' (Uchida, 1992; West and Zimmerman, 1987). When men and women speak they are left with the net result of the effects of this hierarchy often without knowing why - without knowing that they have been using pattens of communications that not only reflect but also serve to constitute patterns of domination and subordination.

Recent Debates on Gender

In the last 20 years, feminist sociolinguistic research has typically been concerned with whether, and how, women and men use language differently, and whether these differences are symptomatic of women's subordinate social status, or contribute to their subordination, or are merely markers of gender difference, and are the result of different sub-cultural norms rather than asymmetrical power relations.

Linguist interested in how power is achieved and maintained through discourse, and in evaluating and re-valuing women's conversational style, have focused on certain features of conversation, and the differences in the use of these features by men and women. Among the most interesting studied features are the following:

- Turn-taking, which includes looking at the propotion of time for which any speaker hold floor, the average length of turns, and also whether the exchange of turns happens without a discernable gap (latching), or whether there are pauses between turns, or overlapping speech, or inter-ruption (Edelsky, 1981, Coates, 1989; Talbot, 1992).
- Questions and tag questions (Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Fishman, 1980; Cameron et al, 1989).
- Topic introduction and development (Coates, 1989; Tannen, 1990).
- Back channel support, when the listener makes *'mmm', 'yeah', 'uhuh'* sounds, or marks that they are actively listening in other verbal or non-verbal ways (Fishman, 1980; Coates, 1989).
- The use of hedging and epistemic modality to qualify the strength of the speaker's opinion. This is realised by the use of expressions such as *'perhaps', 'I suppose',* and epistemic modal auxiliaries such as *'could',* or *'might'* (Holmes, 1984, 1987; Coates, 1987).
- Aggravated and mitigated directives and responses, which relate to how overtly 'orders' are given, or dissent is voiced (Goodwin, 1980, 1988; West, 1990).

Gender-related differences have been found in all the above features of conversation in numerous recent studies, but the studies have not always been in agreement in their findings, nor in the interpretations of their findings.

Theories of Gender and Power Differences

The Deficit Theory of Conversational Differences

The theories of gender and power differences include deficit, dominance, and sub-cultural differences as proposed by researches in the field of language and gender.

According to Robin Lakoff, the style of language which was typically used by women "submerges a women's personal identity, by denying her the means to express herself strongly and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it" (Lakoff, 1975: 7). The features that were characteristic of women's speech syle, and thus denied women 'the means to express [themselves] strongly' and instead make them sound 'trivial' and 'uncertain' were as follows.

    i.   The use of words connected with women's culture (colour terms, sewing terms) which are not in men's vocabulary, or are used dis-paragingly by men.

    ii.   So-called "empty" adjectives, such as "divine" and "charming "

iii.   Tag questiions and rising intonation used with grammatically de-
       clarative utterances.
iv.   The use of hedges to avoid being too assertive or direct.
v.   The use of "so" as an intensifier, as in "I like him so much."
vi.   Hypercorrect forms in pronunciation and grammar.
vii.   Being "superpolite."
viii. Not telling jokes.
ix.   Speaking in *italics* (which presumably refers to women's stress
       patterns).

(Lakoff, 1975· 53-56)

Lakoff was working on the principle that women's speech patterns are
worse than men's, in that they confirm women's subordinate social status and
prevent women from being treated as equals. The deficit model accepts an
androcentric view of the world, holding men's conversational style as the
norm, and women's departure from it as a lack. In some ways, however, it
overlaps with both 'dominance' and 'sub-cultural' models. It shares with the
'dominance' model the idea that women's speech style reproduces their lower
social status. However, in contrast with the 'dominance' model, and in com-
mon with 'sub-cultural' model, it suggests that women's speech style is a
result of their gendered up-bringing, that is a function of feminitys, rather than
a consequence of asymmetrical power relations in every mixed-sex conversa-
tion.

Although Lakoff's work was welcomed by feminists when it first ap-
peared, her model of conversational differences has been criticised on several
grounds, and some of the criticisms will be discussed here because they indi-
cate some of the important methodological developments of the last eighteen
years.

First, Lakoff stands in danger of making a circular argument, whereby
the forms identified as typical of women's language are considered 'weak'
forms because they are used by women, and not because of any linguistic
criteria of what 'weak' forms might be. The study by William O'Barr and
Bowman Atkins (1980) of the speech of witnesses in Carolina court cases
investigated whether gender and weakness or lack of power should be conflated
in this way. They revealed that many of the features that Lakoff had associ-
ated with women's speech such as hesitation, hedging, and other indications
of self-doubt, were typical of insecure speakers or powerless speakers of
either sex. The features which Lakoff had associated with women's language
(hedging, hesitation) also occurred in the speech of inexperienced witnesses
(male and female) in court cases, while more experienced witnesses (female
and male) used these features less. Further studies that pursued the issue of

'women's language or powerless language' include that of Leet-Pellegrini (1980), Beattie (1981), and Woods (1989).

Leet-Pelligrini (1980) studied the ways gender and expertise interacted in conversation to produce dominance. It is her study that influenced other researchers in making the assumption that male experts are in a doubly pow-erful position to dominate less expert females.

Woods (1989) looked at whether interruption in the workplace corre-lated primarily with employment status or with gender. She found that while women bosses were interrupted less than women subordinates, gender had a stronger effect than status on who was interrupted by whom. Since Woods' findings contradict O'Barr and Atkins' (1980) results, the complexity of this question is evident and remains unresolved. It is possible that floor-apportion-ment and hedging are independent of each other, and respond to different aspects of the context.

A second criticism is that Lakoff's interpretation of linguistic forms was simplistic. There was an assumption in her work that the relationship between linguistic forms and their pragmatic function was monolithic. Research has since drawn attention to the extent to which context affects meaning, and to which linguistic forms are polypragmatic, fulfilling multiple functions in a conversation.

The Dominance Theory of Conversational Differences

The 'dominance' theory of gender differences has focused on the distribution of power in society, and suggested that women's speech reflect their subordi-nate position. It allows for the analysis of how asymmetrical power relations are achieved in daily interaction. Work within this model includes Pamela Fishman's studies which claim that women do the 'shitwork' in conversa-tions, that is, they do the conversational support work that enables the con-versation to happen and continue (Fishman, 1980). This is realised by asking questions, introducing topics, and making active listening signals. Fishman reported that the men in her studies would interrupt their partners, delay or omit back channel support, reject topics offered by women, and hold the floor for far longer periods than women.

The strength of this approach is that it offers an account of how power is 'done' in conversations, how patriarchy can be achieved and maintained in the personal sphere between a married couple, for example. It can also be used to explain the reproduction of patriarchy as children learn gender-approriate language use, which also teaches them their 'correct' role in society - domina-tion or submission. According to this model, women can in theory change their interactive patterns to subvert existing power relations.

The main problem identified in the 'dominance' model is that there is no place within it for valuing the style of speech associated with women. The use of all the identified features is seen as a signal of submission, or lack of assertion. From the perspective of the 'dominance' theory, to achieve parity with men, women must change their interactive patterns, and abandon the 'shit-work'

Secondly, the 'dominance' approach tends to treat power as monolithic, limiting its applicability. Status is a complex category affected by context, as Woods pointed out in the discussion on the contradictory results of O'Barr and Atkins.

The Sub-Cultural Theory of Conversational Differences

In contrast to the 'dominance' explanation of gender differences in conversation the 'sub-cultural' model is able to endorse the work that women do in conversation. This model acknowledges that being supportive and trying to achieve solidarity rather than a hierarchy in a group of co-conversationalists, may have intrinsic value. The explanation offered for the gender differences in conversational styles is that an important part of our socialisation occurs in single-sex peer groups, and that male and female peer groups have different norms of communicative competence - competition for boys and co-opera-tion for girls. These differences have been shown to develop in very early childhood. Amy Sheldon's (1992) work suggests that sub-cultural differences in conversational style are evident by the age of three. The strength of this theory in comparison with the dominance approach is that women's speech styles are no longer viewed negatively as the product of powerlessness and as indication of submission. The conversational skills manisfested in women's turn-taking and timing of minimal responses, for example, can be categorised: the choice not to compete for the floor, not to interrupt, not to withhold back channel support, or in other ways violate their own conversational norms, can be seen as a strength of women's conversational style, not a weakness. This style, it is argued, arises from a different sense of social relations and respon-sibilities.

Work within this paradigm includes Maltz and Borker's (1982) paper, *A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication*. In this paper they suggest, though without empirical evidence, that women and men understand back channel support differently, and that this can lead to misunderstanding, frustration and communication breakdown. The theory is that back channel support (noises such as *'mmm', 'uhuh', 'yeah'*, head nodding by the listener) is a sign amongst women of active listening- it means *'I'm listening', 'I understand you, go on'* For men, Maltz and Borker theorise, the same markers mean *'I agree with you'* As a result, in mixed-sex conversations. women

wonder why men appear not to be listening to them, and men wonder why women indicate they agree so often in their role of listener, and then perhaps disagree with them later. The explanation offered for this pragmatic divergence is once again that we learn crucial aspects of conversational competence in single-sex peer groups, and male and female peer groups have different conversational norms.

Other areas of cross-sex misunderstandings according to Maltz and Borker are the meaning of questions, the rules for linking utterances to the ones made by previous speakers, the significance of displays of verbal aggressiveness, the norms of topic shift, and attitudes towards advice giving. In all these areas, Maltz and Borker suggest that women and men have different expectations. One further example, from Coates' work, is the use of overlapping speech. She suggests that whereas women listeners overlap the speaker to indicate support for the speaker's contribution, men may interpret overlap as competition for the floor (Coates, 1994).

The 'sub-cultural' approach, however, has been criticised for its tendency to side-step the issue of power. Women's lesser social status is ignored as a cause for the development of different peer group norms. The 'difference' approach also ignores the effect of the different speech styles in mixed conversation in both the public and private domains - that a verbally combative style will dominate a conversational supportive style.

Achi Uchida has produced a valuable critique of the 'sub-cultural' approach (Uchida, 1992). She faults it for being simplistic in its assumption that women and men belong to different cultures, and for its distinction between 'culture' and 'power' She identifies as a weakness the assumption that "the same-sex ruled will directly be carried over to mixed-sex interaction" (1992: 555). She points out that children are not normally segregated from members of the other sex, however much time they spend in single-sex peer groups, and thus that the 'cross-cultural' analogy is false, since the basis of cross-cultural miscommunication is explained in terms of lack of exposure to another's culture (Ibid.: 556). She also criticises the difference approach because, she argues, by ignoring the dimension of power, the difference approach has to assume that parties on both sides will have an equal investment in adapting their conversation styles to accommodate their interlocutor. This is clearly not the case. It is women who are recommended to adapt their speech styles to improve their relationships with their male counterparts as depicted, for example, in Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1991) which targets women.

Although all the models have their critics, they have all contributed towards improving our understanding of how conversation works, forms of gender difference. the maintenance of these differences, and the value set on different styles by society The deficit, dominance and sub-cultural models are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The concepts of 'deficit' and 'differ-

ence' can only emerge as a result of the patriarchal power explicitly recognised in the 'dominance' theory, since it is a patriarchy which creates and maintains gender differences at all levels. There seems to be general agreement amongst many linguists working in this area that none of these theories offers a totally satisfactory explanation, either singly or in combination, of gender differences in conversational styles. One aspect of difference theory that has been criticised is that women and men are frequently implicity regarded as internally homogenous groups. Differences between individual women, and the differences between individual men, are not taken into account often enough. Neither is sufficient account taken of other social formations, such as ethnicity, class, and sexuality, which affect the power dynamics of interactions. Furthermore, styles which are 'normal' for groups of white, middle class, well-educated, women and men, for example, may be very unusual for other social groups, and thus generalisations made on the basis of the behaviour of one group of people may be totally invalid.

Coates' Approach to Women's and Men's Convensational Styles

Coates (1986: 161) asserts the importance of both the difference and the dominance explanations of the differences observed in women's and men's conversational styles. She suggests that to explain patterns of mixed-sex interaction, a model needs to recognise patriarchal power at work. However, she is dissatisfied with attempts to explain women's behaviour in single-sex interaction as a function of their subordinate social status. In the context of all-women groups, Coates argued that a model of sub-cultural difference is necessary She contends that under these conditions, women's language has features which are identifiable as a style, distinct from the style used by men in the single-six interaction. She states that:

> ...the differences in conversational style between all-women and all-men groups are a reflection of sub-cultural differences such as acknowledgement is a necessary precursor to recognising that women's talk is as deserving of sociolinguistic description in its own right as men's talk.

(Coates, 1986: 161)

Coates claims that it is possible to talk of 'women's style' and 'men's style' In the context of single-sex groups, Women's speech behaviour and men's speech behaviour are characterised by different linguistic features. Women's speech in single-sex groups has a relatively high frequency of linguistic features that are supportive of other group members, and minimise conflict. Men's speech in single-sex groups has a relatively high frequency of features which estab-

lish hierarchies within the group, are information-oriented rather than socially-oriented, and can be described as competitive in function.

Coates' position on this issue has shifted from her early gender and language work. In her 1986 edition of *Women, Men and Language*, she subscribes to the model of sub-cultural differences based primarily on different gender traits being encouraged in children. "It is surely desirable that, as speakers, we all have access to as wide a range of styles as possible. The ideal, androgynous speaker would be able to switch from assertiveness to tentativeness as circumstances required, and would be as good at listening as speaking," (Coates, 1986: preface). This suggests that differences between male and female speakers are just a matter of stylistic choice. Only a slight acknowledgement is made in this preface to the relative positions of women and men in the social hierarchy. "Linguistic differences are merely a reflection of social differences. And as long as society views men and women as different and - unequal - then differences in the language of men and women will persist," (Coates, Ibid).

Coates has recently changed her stand, on the following: 1) the extent to which power is a variable in style of speech; 2) the extent to which dominance is achieved through speech styles; and 3) the extent to which the inequality is produced and maintained in language use, rather than language use merely reflecting social inequality. The 1986 edition of Coates' *Women, Men and Language* reads, "...while not directly responsible for their underachievement, the way girls use language is a contributory factor to their disadvantaged position," (Coates, 1986: 160). The 1993 revision, however, reads "[t]he dif ferential usage of interactional resources by teachers, girls and boys inside the classroom is a key element in sustaining male dominance," (Coates, 1993: 202). Coates' recent work reveals a conviction that gender differences in language use are an important factor in producing gender-related inequalities.

Co-operative and *Competitive* Talk Paradigm

In all-female conversation, Coates identified certain features that occurred frequently, and had either not been the main focus of previous work on conversation, or else had been explained in terms which Coates disputed. These features, typical of all-female conversation according to Coates, were overwhelmingly co-operative and group-oriented in function, and contrasted with features, particularly absent from Coates' all-women data but frequent in male conversation, which are information oriented, and have a competitive function.

Coates is far from being the only linguist to have noted the differences in women's and men's conversational styles, and other linguists, such as Maltz & Borker (1982), and Wodak (1981), have used a co-operative/competitive

distinction to describe the way certain linguistic forms function. The use of the positive term *co-operative* to describe features of discussions is preferred by linguists adopting the 'difference' rather than the 'dominance' explanation for gender differences in conversation. The same features have previously been described as 'tentative' and 'powerless', because of their association with the speech of women rather than because of the inherent linguistic functions. The sub-cultural approach aims to move away from androcentric evaluations of the speech features associated with women, and thus the term *co-operative* indicates the social value of forms previously described as 'unassertive'.

Conclusion

Feminist research must be careful not to reproduce stereotypes uncritically, or assume that women are a homogeneous group who always behave in the same way It seems that this is an empirical question, and the available research evidence points clearly to the same speech style differences between men and women speakers recurring across many contexts, appearing even where male and female speakers are engaged in the same activity (cf. Goodwin, 1988; Tannen, 1990; Cheshire and Jenkins, 1991). In all these studies, conducted in a variety of contexts, the male speakers produced more competitive features than did the female speakers, and the female speakers produced more co-operative features than did the male speakers. This certainly suggests there are measurable differences in styles of speech adopted by women and men in certain situations, and that in the contexts studied, the speech of women is more co-operative than the speech of men. While nothing the reservations of scholars like Coates and Cameron, the basic argument of gender differences in conversational styles is closer to the position held by Tannen (1990) in the conclusion of her investigation of topic coherence in 'best friends' talk, that men and women have different goals in talk, which are carried over to all or most contexts.

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