

GENDER ASYMMETRY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Анотація

У статті розглянуто стереотипне ставлення до чоловіків і жінок у суспільстві. На основі історичних передумов сформувалось мовлення жінок і чоловіків. Наведені приклади, які пояснюють різницю. Теорії відмінності та домінування допоможуть глибше зрозуміти явище гендерної асиметрії.

Ключові слова: гендерна асиметрія, стереотипи, теорія відмінності, теорія домінування, мовленнєві відмінності чоловіків і жінок.

Abstract

Stereotype attitude to men and women in society is discussed here. Women and men language is based on the historical background. Given examples explain the difference. Dominance theory and difference theory will help to understand the phenomenon of gender asymmetry.

Key words: gender asymmetry, stereotypes, difference theory, dominance theory, language distinctions of men and women.

Have you ever heard the phrase, "You can't do it – you're a woman"? Stereotypes are annoying. Unfortunately, stereotypes often influence our representations of gender. Gender stereotypes generally fall into two categories: women and men. Women are considered to be weak, pretty, intuitive, emotional, domestic and social. Men are said to be strong, decisive, practical, rational, public and commanding.

A lot of examples can be found in fiction literature. Where does stereotyping come from? We only have to look into the history books to see male dominance. It wasn't until 1918 that females in the UK got the vote. British history has always been patriarchal – which means the rule of men. They ran the government, the Church and everything else in the public sphere. Because they set the rules, they dictated what women could and couldn't do. In fact, in Victorian times many books were published about the gender difference – stating what males and females could and could not do. It was believed that they fell into different spheres (domestic and public), that because of their biology, it was natural for women to be more caring and stay in the house, while men should be out, making a living. These social constructs were very restraining for females, and perhaps lead to the "sociable" stereotype. When females were locked in the house, their only way of communicating with the outside world was through holding "tea parties" and other events.

The most apparent reflection of the discrimination in language is obviously seen in grammar. The problem is originated from lacking sex-neutral use of third person singular pronoun in English. In that view, generic `he` can be dealt in two perspectives with respect to gender bias and formality. In terms of gender bias, the use of indefinite pronouns such as *anyone* and *everyone* procreates the problem. Although these pronouns refer to both sexes, the pronoun `he`, coined by prescriptivists, is used after these indefinite pronouns in the sentences, regardless `he` is the masculine pronoun. For example: *Everyone left his seats after the bomb denouncement*. In that sentence both `everyone` and `his` refer to both men and women.

The two terms *Mr* and *Mrs* are asymmetrical – unequal. For the male term, the status of the man is disclosed, but the female term marks her as married or unmarried: *Miss/Mrs*. Nowadays, many females prefer a neutral *Ms*. Semantic derogation is where the female term in a male/female pair will acquire negative connotations over time. For example, the two words "*bachelor*" and "*spinster*" have the same denotation (dictionary definition), to be unmarried, but very different connotations (psychological associations). Bachelor might conjure the words: *free, young, choosing to stay single...* while spinster connotes: *old, decrepit, unwanted...*

The difference theory is the idea that males and females really do converse differently. A big advocate of this approach is Deborah Tannen. She believes the difference starts in childhood, where parents use more words about feelings to girls and use more verbs to boys. Males and females belong to different sub-cultures and therefore speak differently. Her book, *You Just Don't Understand*, claims that there are six main differences between the ways males and females use language:[1]

Status vs. support – men see language as a means of asserting dominance; women see it as a way of confirming/supporting ideas.

Independence vs. intimacy – men "go it alone"; women seek support.

Advice vs. understanding – men see language as problem solving; women see it as a means of empathy.

Information vs. feelings – males are concerned with the facts; women with emotions.

Orders vs. proposals – men use imperatives; females use hidden directives.

Conflict vs. compromise – men will argue; women will try to find a middle ground.

William O'Barr and Bowman Atkins wrote a book called *Women's Language Or a Powerless Language?* (1980) They studied the language of the courtroom and found female lawyers to be assertive, interrupt, everything that Pilkington argued for males. They also found that witnesses of both sexes would use Robin Lakoff's weak "female" language. They concluded that these weak language traits are actually a "powerless language" rather than a "female language". O'Barr and Atkin's research is interesting, and seems to suggest that it is not so much differences in the sexes' language, more the situations that they face which result in the difference. This theory is known as the dominance theory: if there is a difference in language, it is because males have always dominated in both the home and workplace, and females have had to play the domestic roles.[2]

Here are the main language distinctions:

Look what occurs when the third person singular is used. The sentences a and b below illustrates this usage:

a– *She know something.*

b– *My sister don't know you.*

The lack of (–s) which requires present tense causes the problem in these sentences. With respect to the findings of an inquiry, the percentage of the use of this feature is 51,7 for males and 6,5 for females.

LEXIS

Women use empty adjectives – (*lovely, cute, fabulous*).

Men use more slang and taboo language.

Men use more insults and aggressive language.

Women use more politeness markers.

Women tend to be more formal.

Women use adverbial intensifiers – (*so, very, really*) and more approximate amounts – (*sort of, about*).

GRAMMAR

Women use tag questions – either social, involving others or hesitant, need reassurance.

Men phrase commands as imperatives while women disguise them as interrogatives.

Women use more modal verbs – (*could, should*) and more modal adverbs – (*possibly, probably*).

DISCOURSE STRUCTURE

Women use more fillers and hedges – (*um, er, sort of*).

Men interrupt more often – 98% of interruptions in mixed conversations were by men.

Women use more supportive overlaps but men use more aggressive language.

So, I have tried to explain, in general, men's and women's roles in language variation because of distinctions in their grammar, lexicon, word choice, topic selection, pronunciation and amount of talks. All these differences among sexes in language result from the discriminating attitudes of the society towards men and women.

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