

## The Role of Gender in Language Change

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to find out the differences in strategies that are used in language and their influences on language change. Also, it aims to find the relationship between the use of language by different genders and their achievements in the development of the language.

Therefore, the paper sheds the light on this impact of the gender on language. First, the paper presents a general overview of the process of language change and how the language can change since the previous centuries. It also illustrates the meaning of gender and the difference between gender and sex. Then, the paper starts to analyze the different variations. It mentions to the role of women in the social mechanisms of language change in which the concept of prestige is considered one of the identical patterns of social class that is considered one of the factors which has a remarkable role in language change.

It also illustrates how women play a significant role in building and establishing the new prestige forms as well as their function in spreading them among enormous geographical domain, unlike men who create new forms that are restricted in only one locality. In addition to that, it presents the various arguments regarding these generalizations that are set up by both genders. Then, it clarifies two basic approaches which discussed the relationship between gender, society and language variation. The paper ends with a critical evaluation of some arguments regarding the role of women in language change through the writer's view and opinion of an opening question depending on some works and studies in this field. The question focuses on the reason for the description of women's language as a powerless speech even though they have the great role in changing the language according to many studies.

## Introduction

Everything in the universe is in a state of change through the ages. Like the other things in the universe, language transforms itself over the centuries. There are many interesting facts about language, and the most pleasing part is the rapid change of the language through the pass of time as a result of a great number of aspects. Thus, there are many factors that have core roles in language change, and one of these factors is the gender. Through the previous centuries, gender tries to come in with new forms especially women who always tend to use new styles that are changeable from one time to another. Therefore, this paper will focus on the difference between males and females in their using of the language which in one way or another play a significant role in changing the language.

The first section of this paper displays the meaning of two essential terms, gender and sex, because it is very important for the reader to know the difference between these concepts and get the idea clearly from the beginning. The second and third sections of this paper presents the variations of language with both gender and sex. The fourth section analyzes the core role of women in the social mechanisms of language change. The fifth section will show the term of the gender from the social psychological perspective approach, followed by another approach that is called the discourse analysis.

The last section of this paper criticizes and evaluates some arguments that appeared in this field relying on the answer of an opening question regarding the role of women, especially, in changing the language.

*1. The difference between gender and sex:*

The book of Language and Gender by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003) defines the term of sex and the term of gender and gives us the differences between them. The term of sex refers to the genetic, physical and biological differences between female and male. In another word, sex presents the biological features which divide people into two basic types either female or male. On the other hand, the term of gender is used to distinguish between sex as biological and gender as socially structured. For example, when a woman born a baby boy, her relatives bring gifts for the baby with blue colors, while if she is a girl, all her clothes will be a pink color. Gender demonstrates the socially structured roles in order to show us the basic and significant differences between men and women according to their power, relationships, behaviors, values, attitudes, and personality characteristics. Gender refers to the feelings, values, and attitudes that attribute to a one's biological sex by cultural aspects. We can consider gender as an obligated identity that develops and alternates over time and varies from one culture to another all over the world. Gender refers not only to the social differences between women and men, but also to the relationships between them. Thus, we can say that sex relies on nature while gender depends on culture.

Both terms sometimes are used to know the differences between the social factors and biological characteristics. Although it is difficult to separate between the two terms, they are treated in sociolinguistic research as distinguished categories. Thus, we will use the term of 'sex' here when we mention simplistic classification of speakers either female or male. On the other hand, we will use the term of 'gender' when we discuss some points which have relevant social and cultural factors (Chambers, Trudgill & Schilling-Estes, 2002).

## 2. Variation with speaker sex:

According to some works in the field of linguistics, there are several differences between men and women in their use of language in which women use one variant of a language more than men and vice versa. For instance, the article of “*The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*”. In this article, Trudgill explains gender differences. The early works in the sociolinguistic field were more focused on searching for the differences in social class that have the ability to affect language change. However, they discovered through the pass of time that there were other factors that also can change the language. One of these factors is the issue of gender difference. This article mentioned the idea that women prefer to use high numbers of prestige forms than men; for instance, their using of the words that end with ‘ing,’ while men use the alveolar /n/. This would indicate that women seem to be more sensitive to the prestige pattern than men (Trudgill, 1974).

## 3. Variation with Gender:

There are some studies about the nature of the sex differentiation that have been observed in specific communities. The findings of these studies proved that there are some social factors that affect the use of language such as; the social class, sex, ethnic group, and age. One of these studies is the study of Fought (1999) which examined a specific place in the Western of Los Angeles. The study illustrated that all the young people in this place either they want to be gang membership or not tend to use certain patterns of /u/- fronting. It also discovered that there was a complicated relationship among social class, gender, and gang membership. Moreover, the study presented that there are different degrees of /u/- fronting depending on three important aspects including social class, age, and gang membership. For example, young women from the middle and low classes who have links to gang groups even if they did not participate in gang activities tend to use most of /u/- fronting. On the other hand, all men with different ages from the middle and low classes either they are interested in gang activities or not tend to use /u/- fronting. This study showed clearly that sex of speakers does not connect to linguistic behavior directly, but it inverts the complicated social practice.

Another study is the study of Nichol (1983) which studied the use of the features of Gullah Creole in some part and cities in the southwestern of the United States. This study showed that older women and men tend to use these features while young males and females use a high portion of Standard English variants. In the end, all the studies proved that there was a complicated relationship between linguistic behavior and gender, and this complexity cannot be captured by generalizations that depend on the separating into males or females (Chambers, Trudgill & Schilling-Estes, 2002).

Similarly, the study of Davies (2003) tried to see the differences between both genders in their using of various styles of language through the examination which is done in small groups' classroom discussions. This studies discovered that girls try to express their allegiance through their choosing for specific words and establishing their own sentences. On the other hand, boys' expressing for their loyalties were not compatible. As a result, we can conclude that males' using of language refers to their eager to prove their male culture while female's language associated with the concept of politeness in their language. Therefore, we conclude that women tend to insert new forms in their speech to make it different and special which has an important role in changing the language through the pass of time.

#### *4. The Role of Women in the Social Mechanism of Language Change:*

The concept of prestige and standardness is one of the stratification models of social class that is considered one of the causes behind language change. In most of Labov studies regarding the women use of language, he frequently mentions to the principle that women always tend to acquire all new prestige forms even from outside their speech community, beside their elimination for all the forms that they think they are denounced.

The new prestige form began in small communities and used by few people, however; through the time, the change increased, became older, and more established in the community. For example, the new prestige form started to use by young people from specific social class and certain gender group, and gradually it is used even by old people and among the different social classes. Therefore, we can notice that sex differentiation interacts with other different kinds of social differentiation pertinent to the community.

From this point, we can conclude that new forms become more widespread, speakers become more consciously of them, and sex differentiation becomes more marked.

There is an argument by the Milroys in which sex differentiation is the main reason behind language change more than social class differentiation. They also state that it is wrong to say women prefer to use the prestige forms; instead, we can say that they created these new prestige forms because they think that these forms they use the most prestigious in the community. For that reason, they called the new prestige forms the women created supra-local patterns while the localized forms are associated with men groups. For example, according to Labov, there are many changes that created by women, such as; the changes that occurred in the chain shifts in different northern cities in the USA. On the other hand, there are a small number of changes by men, like the rounding of /o/ in Norwich. The changes which appeared as a result of men's use of language are isolated which means that these changes occurred in only one locality while there is a greater range of style shiftings constructing by women as a result of their possession of a great range of social contacts that extend to a great geographical range.

There are many studies which discuss the generalizations that appear in specific communities as a result of women's or men's construction. On the other hand, there are many studies that argued these generalizations. Kuiper (1998) argued that the generalizations which occurred by sex differentiation present the importance in which this social variable helps to understand the social mechanism of sound change, so there is no single aspect that shows the variation in the linguistic behavior of women and men in all communities. Eckert (1989) argued that there are clear generalizations regarding the relationship between genders and sound change after the examination in some communities with the respect to the sociocultural contexts where men and women live (Chambers, Trudgill & Schilling-Estes, 2002).

##### *5. Gender from a Social Psychological Perspective:*

Until recently, there are various researches which look at the social categories as a static concept depending on the connection between the speaker and his/her overall frequency of use of a specific variant. However,

the social psychologists have a view regarding gender and treated it as a dynamic construct in which the individuals perform or create various aspects of their social identities at various moments within a single interaction or in different situations. Even though this approach is very difficult to be analyzed, there are some researchers who have the courage to attempt and do it.

The clear example that illustrates the previous point is the study of Takano (1998) that analyzed the variation in deleting the postpositional particles -wa and -ga in Japanese informal speech. Takano in this study observed that women tend to use this kind of deletion more frequently than men. However, the design of her research relied on whether the frequency ellipsis occurred in conversations of mixed- sex groups, cross-sex, or same sex groups (Chambers, Trudgill & Schilling-Estes, 2002).

#### *6. Gender from a Discourse Analysis Approach:*

Discourse analysis approach depends on the study of language and gender where gender identities are created and represented through language. It relies on the idea that the sounds which attributes of the social groups who use them most frequently can create social significance through distributional and classificational patterns, even though these sounds are considered inherently meaningless. For instance, if a certain variant is used by women more frequently than men, it may attribute to the expression of femininity and create a stereotypically female identity in discourse contexts in which this feature of the speaker's identity is salient. Moreover, if a specific variant is related to the working classes, it may index different culturally-recognized aspects of working-class culture (Chambers, Trudgill & Schilling-Estes, 2002).

For example, Holmes (1997) shows that in a conversational narrative of specific occasion, a woman can construct a stereotypical gender identity for herself. She presents herself through her story as a perfect mother and a responsible daughter. Woman can do this not only by the content of her story, but also through her expression for this conservative gender identity when she uses some particular phonological variants that are used more frequently by women than men especially in New Zealand women's speech. Holmes introduces some examples for this kind of stereotypical identity for women, such as; their using for the standard realization of the /ing/, their using for the conservative aspirated variant of intervocalic /t/, and their using of some pragmatic particles like [you know, sort of] with affective meaning.

As a result, we can conclude that a collection of particular phonological choices, the use of some specific pragmatic devices, lexical selection, and the selected topic and structure that the female narrator choose play an important role in constructing a conservative feminine gender identity.

In addition to that, through the linguistic choices made in the dialogue of an advertisement presents some different masculine identities, but in general most of the stereotypical identities is associated to the female. For example, the powerless and polite identity always is attributed to the women (Chambers, Trudgill & Schilling-Estes, 2002).

#### *7. The Critical Evaluation:*

As we saw above, all the previous studies and works focused mainly on the role of women in language change. They mentioned to the new styles and forms which inserted in the language by men, but they are infrequent when they are compared with those terms which appeared as a result of women's role in inserting the new styles in the language. Therefore, do you think that women have the core role in changing the language more than men? If so, why did many linguists describe women's language as a powerless language?

According to my observation of the studies I have been read and according to the works that discussed the topic of gender and language change, the majority of these studies concentrated on two main ideas. The first idea is that women tend to use new forms that they inserted in the language more than men. The second one mentioned to a very important point that made a great controversy among linguists in which the new styles that are inserted in the language and used more frequently by women made women's speech powerlessly or weak. In my point of view, not only women have an important role in changing the language, but also men's speech change from time to time as a result of their insertion for some new forms. However, the majority of these new forms and styles are attributed to women's speech. Moreover, I want to mention to some facts and aspects regarding the nature of both genders that I think it is the main reason behind the differences between men and women that resulted in one way or another in changing the language. First of all, in the social sciences, there are many studies which prove that women's speech depends on using verbal interactions with verbal communication for social purposes.

On the other hand, men's language based on instrumental purposes of conveying information. Secondly, in our social life, there are significant facts in biological sciences which made a distinction between men and women in their language use. The first and most important one is the internal configuration of men and women. Women have unique and special configurations that give them different features that distinguish them from men. For instance, women are characterized by their transparency, sensitiveness, fineness, kindness, and so on, while men are characterized by their roughness, toughness, power, authority, strength and so on. These different characteristics affect their use of the language.

In my opinion, the natural features that I mentioned above play a considerable role in which women tend to insert and use prestige, politeness, and standard speech as it is discussed in some sections of this paper. This politeness and standardness speech made women's language powerless according to many studies in the history of linguistics. For instance, all the studies of Lakoff especially her studies in (1975) presented women's language as a powerless speech. On the other hand, there are some other studies that proved that women's use of language with some specific features did not make their speech weak as the study of Maltz and Borker (1982). To end this discussion, I disagree with Lakoff that women's speech is powerless, and I believe that both genders have a great role in changing the language. In the past decades, there is a proverb in which men are superior, while women are inferior. I think this proverb let the linguists focused on women's language more than men's speech and made a stereotype that women's speech is powerless or weak. In addition to that, even though this kind of stereotype is developed gradually through time, it is still exist in some cultures of specific societies such as, Japanese and Chinese societies where they put limits on women's speech in order not to be equal with men. Therefore, I believe that cultural and social restrictions beside the internal configurations of women made their use of language very different from men. Because the restrictions and limits of one society differ from one time to another, the language of both genders especially women will be changed from time to time. Thus, society has also a great influence on language change through the limits that impose on gender's use of language.

## Conclusion

The goal of this paper is an attempt to present the changes that occurred in the language as a result of the various use of the language by the different gender groups.

Even though there are controversy and disagreements among scholars regarding the role of gender in language change, there are many other researchers whose studies have a rich understanding of the relationship between sex and gender, and between language variation and change. They have also shown the other social dimension and how they might be explored similarly. In addition to that, they have shown how the aspects and features of social theory might be incorporated into the variationist enterprise. Before starting analysis the process of language changes in different communities, the paper starts with a brief introduction, followed by general definitions of two important concepts, gender and sex, in order to see what the difference between them is. It presents the variation with speakers' sex and with gender. It also tries to analyze the role of women in the social mechanism of language change, followed by presenting two important approaches which illustrate the relationship between gender and language change. The first approach is the social psychological perspective, and the second one is the discourse analysis approach. The paper ends with mention to the writer's view about the arguments regarding the description of linguists for women's speech and its role in language change. To conclude, the differences between genders presents how the new forms and styles that both genders insert them in the language began in small communities and used by few and young people. Then, gradually they became larger and spread to a very wide range, and used even by the old people. The insertion of these new forms play core role in changing the language through the time. The best example is our generation which insert new styles that are different from those of the old generation.

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