

The Different Language Use between Male and Female University Students

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Abstract

This research was done to answer the following problem statements 1) What are the differences in language use between males and females of the third-semester university students? 2) Why do the male and female of the third-semester university students use language differently? As this was a descriptive qualitative method, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was given to 26 participants (13 males, 13 females). The study resulted as follows; The differences in language used between male and female participants are exaggerated adjectives, adverbs, expletives, exaggerated pronouns, and supportive words and empathy. Besides, most female participants chose gossip while all of the males and two females chose sport as the most topic of conversation they had. Furthermore, the participants used language differently because of their different personalities, expressions, and ways to react during the interview.

Keywords: *EFL, gender differences, higher education*

Introduction

In sociolinguistics, the use of language is different between males and females in terms of the syntactic category, intonation, syntactic structure, and conversational style. Tannen (1990) found several interesting points about gender and language use theory where in terms of the intention of speaking, men are competitive and intend to build individual status; while, women's conversations are supportive and were built through gossip. Besides, men are problem solvers; in contrast, women are attention seekers. Women give a complaint in order to get empathy from their male partner, while men tend to give solutions with logical explanations. Furthermore, women use 'let's pattern' as a proposal, but men imply it as an order. Based on these theories, consequently, the differences in communication between males and females often create miscommunication and misinterpretation of meaning from the opposite gender of speakers.

Interestingly, based on the researcher's daily experience and observation, she observed that her male friends used taboo words and imperative sentences more frequently than the females. Contrary to male classmates, her female classmates were more talkative than the males were. In terms of conversation topic choices, males' topics of discussion were more about activities such as sport and games, while females used to gossip and shopping. Viewing the facts discussed above show us that gender and language use theory is happening in society. Those phenomena also indicate that language is not just a tool for conveying information – it is also a tool for creating and understanding the reality around us.

The research about gender and language use has been studied before. Godhino and Shrimpton (2003) conducted a study entitled *Boys' and Girls' Use of Linguistics Space in Small Group Discussion: Whose Talk Dominates?* and showed that the boys had limited

interpretation but eagerly dominated the discussion. Conversely, girls' comments demonstrated a more imaginative and deep level of thinking. This research also found out that social background may influence someone's participation in literature-small group discussion. Also, it proved that boys and girls have different ways of interpretation in literature. Furthermore, Akhter (2014) held a study on *Differences in Language Use by Male and Female Students in Tertiary Academia in Dhaka City* and found that 32% of the total participants used formal language, and the informal language majority were used by males. As for tag questions, 92% were used by females. Regarding the tone of talk in using a language, the research showed that 82 % of the total participants talked loudly, and 88% were male. The evidence of the study showed that 88% of females used hedges. The evidence of the study also showed that 92% of males used taboo words and slang. Surprisingly, in terms of using supportive language, females used 100% supportive languages. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate how university female and male students use language differently.

Literature Review

The Theories of Gender and Language Use

The first approach of the language and gender is the deficit approach. Initiated in the early 1970s by Robin Lakoff, this approach sees women as disadvantaged language users with their language conflicting from an implicit male norm. This approach describes male language as stronger, more prestigious, and more desirable and assigns language variances between men and women to the dominance of men within society. Furthermore, Tannen (1990) undertook further studies and popularized the different approach in her book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Her approach developed the two-culture model of men and women and claimed six points for male and female language, including status or support, independence or intimacy, advice or understanding, information or feelings, orders or proposals, and conflicts or compromise. This approach showed that gender dialect and different word choice between male and female often leads to miscommunication.

Furthermore, Wenjing (2012) stated that women always use a word with exaggerated significance, such as gorgeous, lovely, cute, divine, adorable, darling, precious, sweet, charming, and so on. In contrast, men use plain words to enhance the effect, like good, beautiful, and so on. There are also differences in the use of adverbs between men and women. Women tend to use such adverbs like awfully, pretty, terribly, vastly, quite, so; men like to use very, utterly, really. Moreover, Lakoff (1973) found that females use more intensifiers than males, such as awfully, pretty, terribly, quite, and so on. Using more adjectives to describe things and their feelings can show that women are more sensitive to the environment and more likely to express their emotions with words. There is a special feminine vocabulary in English that men may not, dare not, or will not use. Moreover, women are good at expressive and exaggerated adjectives and adverbs, as well as how they address their friends. They tend to address their friends as dear, baby and etc. On the other hand, men dare not to do the same because society will assume that they are womanish or ladylike. Sach (cited in Tannen 1990, 78) observed a group of boys and girls on one street in Philadelphia, and the study found that the imperative sentences that the boys and girls use were different. The boys used a lot of imperative sentences. In order to reduce the imperative tone, girls use more adverbs like maybe, perhaps, probably, or "let's patterns."

According to Lakoff (1973), the differences in language between men and women are caused by social factors, not the language itself. These social factors are discussed below:

1. Men and women's social role is different as they carry out different social responsibilities in social activities. At the beginning of the Bible, one thing is certain that women's social

status is governed and dominated by men. In all, women speak without confidence because they have low social status and have no power.

2. Society is men-centered. People reach an agreement that men are superior to women. The women are considered in a lower status.
3. Value is another element. Value is the core of culture; hence, different values also influence men and women's vocabulary selection.
4. According to the physiological factors, it is stated that innate biological differences between men and women decide men and women are different. From the development of language skills, the women's left hemisphere develops earlier than men's. So, the girl speaks more frequently and is more emotional than the boy from the beginning. On the other hand, the latest voice experiment proved that the male and female voice on the resonance peak is very different voice tone quality because of their gender.

Research Methodology

The research participants were 13 male and 13 female students of a private university in Kupang. As this was a qualitative study, the data were gained through the discourse completion test (DCT). DCT is a tool used in linguistics to elicit a particular speech act. The DCT was given twice in order to gain rich data about the differences in language use between males and females. In both DCTs, six scenarios were designed specifically for these six areas, namely (1) exaggerated adjectives and adverbs, (2) exaggerated pronoun, (3) expletives, (4) proposal or order – imperative and less imperative sentence, (5) solution or empathy, and (6) differences in topic choosing. The participants were asked to respond to the scenarios given and were recorded throughout the study.

After collecting the data, participants' responses towards DCT scenarios were transcribed and categorized based on Tannen's approach (1990). Those categories were exaggerated adjectives and adverbs, proposal versus order – imperative and less imperative sentence, solution versus empathy, expletives using, and differences in topic choosing. Besides, the frequency of six categories was counted using simple descriptive analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows that female students exceed male students in using exaggerated adjectives and adverbs with a sharp difference. The exaggerated adjectives or adverbs such as 'gorgeous', 'great', 'so sweet', 'amazing', 'creepy', occurred predominantly in the female students' utterances than in the male students' utterances that tended to use the plain adjectives like 'very good' or 'very bad'. A similar finding appeared in the study by Wenjing (2012) and in accordance with Tannen's (1990) theory of male and female differences in the use of exaggerated adjectives.

Table 1
Male and Female Differences in Language Use

Categories	Examples	Male	Females
Exaggerated Adjectives and Adverbs	gorgeous, great, very good, very nice, so sweet, amazing, very bad, creepy	13	34
Expletives	oh dear!, oh my God!, oh!, wow!	11	27
Supportive Words and Empathy	get well soon!, don't worry!, you will be fine/ okay, you have to be strong, you must be yourself	10	20
Solution		7	5
Proposal (Less-imperative Sentences)	maybe you can help me, if you don't mind can you..., it's dirty can we clean it?, come on/let's clean it, oh dear, can you help me?	18	21
Order (Imperative Sentences)	hey!, open the door!, can you help me!↗	6	7
Exaggerated Pronoun	(say, dear)	0	8
Common pronoun	(bro)	8	0

Furthermore, female students used a higher frequency of supportive words or phrases. They used phrases such as "Get well soon!", "Don't worry!", "you will be fine/ okay", "you have to be strong", "you must be yourself" to show their empathy (Tannen 1990) to their interlocutors. In addition, the proposal pattern (Tannen, 1990) was also employed by the participants with a slightly higher frequency performed by female students than the male students. It can be inferred that male participants still show politeness in asking a request to their interlocutors.

As for exaggerated pronouns, Table 1 shows how males and females addressed their friends. Most females used exaggerated pronouns in addressing their friends ("say", "dear"), while males used common pronouns.

In terms of topic choice, Tannen (1990) stated that males used activities in building relationships, while females used the conversation to build intimacy with the same gender friends. Table 2 showed the differences in the topics chosen by the participants. This result

proved that the theory by Tannen (1990) occurred in this research. The frequency is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Differences of Topic Choosing

Participants	Sport	Gossip	Games
Male (1st meeting)	4	0	5
Male (2nd meeting)	9	0	0
Female (1st meeting)	2	7	0
Female (2nd meeting)	2	7	0

Based on the direct observation during the DCT survey, it was found that one of the reasons for the gender difference in language use is due to a difference in personalities and communication. Their personalities influenced and determined their different way of using language, their living styles, and their different views on life. The participants have different personalities. She found some female participants who gave unexaggerated adjectives and adverbs acted like males; they gave minimal expressive responses. In contrast, males who gave exaggerated adjectives were more talkative than the other male participants. In short, we can conclude that participants' characteristics influenced their word choices.

Conclusions

The current study found there are some differences in language use between male and female students. The female students used more exaggerated adjectives and adverbs, representing their emotions and feelings in responding to their interlocutors. In addition, they used more expletives than males did, such as oh dear!, oh my God! It showed that female participants were more expressive and emotional in using language than males. Second, the findings for the theory of solution, proposal pattern, choice of conversational topics confirmed the theory by Tannen (1990). Besides, the participants with a certain gender used language differently because they acted differently in the interview; most females were talkative and expressive in giving their response. On the other side, most males gave minimal responses. During the interview, their attitudes and performances indirectly influenced how they gave their responses, thus responding in different syntactic categories.

In connection with the results of the research, the researcher has several points of suggestions for future studies. The researcher realized that the data obtained from this research was based on the setup situation or on the situational based question and very limited to be able to make a generalization. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers conduct direct observation in order to get the data. In addition, it was suggested that readers should have a better understanding of different communication styles due to gender difference in order to avoid misunderstanding in social interaction between community members regardless of their gender.

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