

THE INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER, LANGUAGE, DOMINANCE, AND IDENTITY: MIXED VS. SAME-SEX TALK IN THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC DOMAINS, SEXUALITY, AND BEYOND

LA INTRICA RELACIÓN ENTRE GÉNERO, IDIOMA, DOMINANCIA E IDENTIDAD: *MIXED VS. SAME-SEX TALK* EN LOS ÁMBITOS PRIVADO Y PÚBLICO, SEXUALIDAD Y MÁS ALLÁ

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Abstract: Both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that there is an intricate relationship between gender and language. This can be analysed from a number of different perspectives. Beyond the private domain, women's talk has been studied within the specific framework provided by the public sphere. We see that women are commonly expected to conform to the androcentric rule, thus taking on the more information-focused style of all-male talk. This paper analyzes how a specific context goes along the lines of other common ideological polarizations.

Keywords: Gender, Language, Dominance, Identity, Sexuality

Resumen: Tanto la evidencia empírica como anecdótica sugiere que existe una relación intrincada entre género y lenguaje. Esto se puede analizar desde varias perspectivas diferentes. Más allá del ámbito privado, el discurso de las mujeres se ha estudiado tradicionalmente dentro del marco específico proporcionado por la esfera pública. Vemos que comúnmente se espera que las mujeres se ajusten a la regla androcéntrica, adoptando así el estilo de conversación exclusivamente masculino, más centrado en la información. Este artículo analiza cómo un contexto específico sigue las líneas de otras polarizaciones ideológicas comunes.

Palabras clave: Género, Idioma, Dominancia, Identidad, Sexualidad

1. Introduction

Both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that there is an intricate relationship between gender and language. This can be analyzed from a number of

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different—yet complementary—perspectives. As early as the 1980s, research articles can be found that explore the way in which gender, power, and dominance interact in mixed-sex talk (West & Zimmerman, 1983; DeFrancisco, 1991; Herring *et al.*, 1992). Complementarily, the complex relationship between gender and language has been approached from a same-sex talk perspective, both in female-only (Coates, 1989) and male-only settings (DeCapua & Boxer, 1999; Cameron, 1997). Beyond the private domain, women's talk has been studied within the specific—and of utmost interest—framework provided by the public sphere (Reynolds, 1991; Holmes & Schnurr, 2006). In more recent times, sexuality has been added to the combination in an attempt to obtain a bigger—and clearer—picture (Abe, 2004; Hall, 2009; Leap, 2008).

Some scholars have even traveled the extra mile by providing insightful approaches to the relationship between gender, language, and identity by establishing explicit connections between these concepts and related cultural practices (relevantly to this topic, Boxer & Gritsenko (2005) compare how women in the US and Russia tackle the surname issue when faced with marriage or partnership).

As far as mixed talk goes, the articles reviewed show that the language used therein provide evidence for the existence of asymmetrical relationships across genders. This has led scholars to wonder whether gender relationships might be defined more appropriately in terms of actual “power relationships” (West & Zimmerman, 1983). Many of such assumptions actually stem from the Conversation Analysis approach (henceforth referred to as “CA”), whose earliest roots date back to the mid-1970s (Sack, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). Even though these early studies do not contemplate data from outside of the actual conversation, still they show preliminary data that highlights men's tendency in mixed-talk settings to remain uncooperative by often violating turn-taking or constantly interrupting topics discussed by their female counterparts—with these apparently being expected, more or less implicitly, to remain silent and adopt the role of passive hearers. West and Zimmerman (1983), clearly adhering to the CA methodology, search for instances of such violations and conclude that over 96% of interruptions (N=46/48) were male-to-female. Along these lines, the authors find some worrisome similarities between women's and children's language, both of whom begin many utterances using gambits (e.g, *guess what?*), as though they felt compelled to implicitly seek for men's permission to intervene in the conversation. Additionally, when faced with an interruption, women's attitude appeared to be most conciliatory, since they tended to remain silent and dismiss their own contribution to the conversation.

In connection with this idea, DeFrancisco (1991) elicits everyday at-home conversations in stable married couples, then delves into their underpinnings from a cross-gender perspective. In this case, the author also concludes that men are more prone to commit turn-taking violations, whereas women appear to be more in need of resorting to attention-seeking strategies such as the use of—in the author's own words—"guilt strategies" (e.g., "you never listen to me!"). Empirical evidence suggests that the aforementioned patterns also apply to more recent communication supports and, among these, the computer-mediated discourse. Along these lines, Herring *et al.* (1992) reach similar conclusions to those in West and Zimmerman (1983) and DeFrancisco (1991), in the sense that men show a consistent tendency to appear as "more popular" (e.g., by initiating more and longer threads, as well as receiving higher response rates).

When it comes to comparing same-sex talk, a relevant contrast is found between the collaborative (i.e., minimal responses, apparently more common in women) and competitive (i.e., "playing the expert," which appears to be more common in men) styles. When speakers of both genders aim at an equitable use of both styles, solidarity is achieved in talk, even if different strategies are used contingent on the gender (i.e., self-disclosure in women, playful conflict and competition in men). Cameron (1997) attempts to find whether gossip, as a characteristic of interactional ("phatic communion") conversations, is more common among men or women. Gossip is defined as the "discussion of a person not present but known to the participants," which has a strong focus on aspects such as the individual's appearance, dress, social behavior, and sexual mores. In connection with the workplace, DeCapua and Boxer (1999) provide an example of how "male boasting behavior" is reflected in a brokerage firm. A pervasive unwritten rule in society is detected according to which individuals appear to be incessantly compelled to conform to a binary gender construal (e.g., Cameron (Jun 16, 2019) depicts certain groups of men as willing to go long distances to deepen their voice in a way that reaffirms their own masculinity).

Interestingly, Boxer and Gritsenko (2005) provide a valuable insight into the matter from a cross-cultural anthropological perspective. Specifically, they analyze a practice that is deeply ingrained in western civilization, but also in other cultures such as Russia—how naming choices affect one's individual, social, and professional identity. Data from the US and Russia appear to be consistent for the most part, with "retainers" being the minority group of choice. In the study, over 50% of women stressed "tradition" as the reason why they preferred to adopt their spouse's family names.

2. Women's talk in the public domain

When we focus on women's talk in the public domain, we see that women are commonly expected to conform to the androcentric rule, thus taking on the more information-focused style of all-male talk. Every alternative style tends to be viewed as "deviant," which leaves women with fewer choices and continuously exposed to the double bind. Reynolds (1991) analyzes how Japanese women are transitioning with regard to their public talk in a society that has left the Confucian doctrine behind to embrace the contemporary ideology of equality of the sexes. In a society in which "wife" has traditionally been the only legitimate social category for women, the author concludes that Japanese women appear to be "defeminizing" their speech within limits, specifically in relation to their integration in the workforce. Cameron (Nov 10, 2019) sarcastically tackles how a woman not depending on a man has traditionally been referred to as a "social outcast" by using derogatory terms such as *spinster*, which have recently revived in some circles. This relates quite closely to the research conducted by Holmes and Schnurr (2006), which reveals the existence of "multiple femininities" in the workplace, specifically on the affiliative-contesting scale. More specifically, the authors focus on women's humor, experience, and confidence in the workplace, from which it is inferred that femininity can actually be reclaimed as a positive attitude—even an actual "asset."

It is duly noted that the aforementioned articles tend to adopt a binary approach to gender-related issues. Since the early 2000s, however, there has been an increasing trend toward representing the gender-language interface in the light of non-binary perspectives. Those that support this idea view gender as a dynamic, fluid social construal that is exposed to change over time and has little to do with the individual's "standard equipment" from a biological standpoint. Relevantly enough, Abe (2004), Hall (2009), and Leap (2008) provide a view of gender that results in a clearly more intricate conception than the traditionally taken-for-granted binary. Whether it is to express sexuality or differing levels of femininity/masculinity, multiple cultures—including some North American indigenous ones—have traditionally resorted to non-binary gendered language. It is especially Leap (2008) that conveys the idea that gender is not static and, relatedly, language provides sites for alternative formations and defining terms (e.g., *queer*, *genderqueer*, *genderfluid*, *agender*, *intersex*, *cisgender*, *AFAB/AMAB*¹).

¹ Respectively, *assigned female at birth*, *assigned male at birth*.

Abe (2004) analyzes some lesbian bar talk instances in Japan, specifically focusing on the variety of choices concerning first-person pronouns, “bald” commands (i.e., using imperative forms), and sentence-final particles. Japanese possesses three series of first-person pronouns that are respectively used by both men and women (i.e., *watakushi, watashi*), only by men (i.e., *boku, ore, wagabai, washi*), and only by women (i.e., *atakushi, atashi, atai, uchi*). The subjects in this study showed consistent preference for the first group, alongside the neutral expression *jibun* (lit. ‘oneself’). The author also finds that, when the speaker is extremely angry, they are more likely to use strong imperative forms (e.g., *fuzaken na* ‘[lit.] don’t mess with me!’ vs. *fuzakeru na* ‘[lit.] please do not pull my leg’). Generally speaking, the individuals under study appear to reject forms that they are perceiving as being “too feminine” and instead adopt forms that are regarded as “more masculine” or “neutral.” In his search for a potential writing sample of “gay men’s English,” Leap (2008) acknowledges that “meanings of gender are expressed through linguistic practice.” However, he questions the feasibility of actually “indexing a gendered presence” in a situation that is already constructed. Not only would attempting to do so immediately lead to undesired biases, but also gender in discourse appears to be hardly separable from a number of pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors.

In comparing so-called “(self-identified) lesbian talk” to “boys’ talk” (including the choice of language between English and Hindi), Hall (2009) notices that in the former the very use of Hindi for discussions of sexuality was regarded as a “kind of masculine vulgarity.”

3. Conclusions

It is interesting to analyze how a specific bilingual context (in this case, the Hindi vs. English dichotomy) goes along the lines of other common ideological polarizations (e.g., *upper class vs. lower class, femininity vs. masculinity, lesbian vs. boy*). In these social interactions it is not only the “degree of masculinity,” but also social class, that is emergent. In such a way, most of researchers influenced by the paradigm of performativity, prefer to consider gender, race, and sexuality as ideological rather than fixed categories.

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