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Throughout the history of human beings, men and women have been perceived to be different in many ways, and language use is an excellent example of the differences between them. Based on early work on gender and language, it is generally believed that women tend to talk more than men even though there is no evidence to support such common assumptions about women's verbosity (Sunderland, 2006); however, the widely held belief that men and women use language differently is confirmed by a number of research studies which will be elaborated in subsequent paragraphs. To this end, this essay is aimed at discussing the differences in language use between men and women, with reference to the literature in the field of sociolinguistics when possible, and this paper will end with classroom implications for language learning and teachings, taking into account the language variation between male and female counterparts.

Linguistic differences between men and women

According to Holmes (2008), there are two types of differences between men and women in terms of language use: gender-exclusive speech differences and gender-preferential speech features. The former refers to particular linguistic features which occur only in the women's speech or only in the men's speech, meaning that some words or pronunciations which are found in men's speech are less likely to be found in women's speech, and vice versa. For example, in traditional Japanese, the word for father is *otoosan* in women's speech, but *oyaji* in men's. Gender-preferential speech features, however, refer to particular linguistic forms used by both men and women, but one gender tends to use those features more often than the other. A good example for this would be the pronunciation of *-ing* ending in words like *swimming* and *walking*, which is more frequently pronounced as [in] by men and as [iŋ] by women (Holmes, 2008).

Despite the differences in pronunciation and vocabulary, there are also variations in word-shapes due to the use of different suffixes (Holmes, 2008). In Yana, a North American Indian language, for instance, some words used between men are longer than the equivalent words used by women to women because the men's forms sometimes require an additional suffix (e.g. women's form for the word *person* is *yaa* while men's form is *yaa-na*). Similarly, in the language of Karaja, a

tribe in Brazil, there are systematic differences between male and female forms of words (Oancea, 2011). For example, the men in Karaja say *heto* for *house* while their female peers say *hetoku*.

Another gender-related difference in language use is to do with the popular myth about women's verbosity. As mentioned above, women are considered to talk more than men, which is evident in numerous proverbs and sayings such as "A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail" (English) and "The North Sea will be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for words" (Jutlandic) Coats (as cited in Sunderland, 2006, p. 2). Nevertheless, the opposite is true since many research studies have found that men, in fact, seem to talk more than women in mixed-gender groups, and the most frequently quoted ratio of the average amount of talking time between men and women in a mixed-sex conversation is two to one (Thomas et al., 1999). Thus, this finding clearly contradicts the conventional assumption that women talk more than men. However, in her classic book, *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*, Tannen (1991) claims that men talk more in public speaking to maintain status and draw attention while women tend to talk more in private speaking in order to establish a good rapport and connection.

One important aspect of language variations between men and women which receives considerable attention among researchers in the field of sociolinguistics is the effect of gender on language change. According to Holmes (2008), women are generally considered to be the innovators of language change, leading changes toward prestige norms, whereas men tend to introduce vernacular changes. Similarly, Labov (1990) states that men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms than women in stable situations, and women are more likely to bring about linguistic change towards the standard forms. The reason for this bidirectional linguistic change is not unusual since it is found that, in Western speech communities all over the world, women use more standard forms than men while men use more vernacular forms than women (Gal, 1978; Gordon, 1997; Trudgill, 1972; Wolfram, 1969, cited in Nichols, 1978). In a similar vein, women in my country, Cambodia, are highly expected to be reserved and polite and therefore their language is very likely to be more standard but less assertive than that of their male peers.

Another key aspect of the male and female linguistic differences is related to the content and function of speech. According to Holmes (2008, p. 310), miscommunication which generally occurs between men and women is the result of "the different expectations each gender has of the function of the interaction". In other words, women's talk usually focuses on something personal such as personal experiences, feelings, relationships, or problems in order to build solidarity and maintain social relationships, whereas men's talk usually centres on topics related to things and activities such as sports, cars, and other impersonal topics to maintain status and independence and to share information (Holmes, 2008; Tannen, 1991). These differences, therefore, commonly lead to breakdowns in communication between males and females. In another study which analyses over 14,000 text samples (8,353 text files from women and 5,970 from men), Newman, Groom, Handelman, and Pennebaker (2008) also found that there is a small but consistent gender differences in language use. The findings from the analysis reveal that women talk about thoughts, emotions, senses and other people and use pronouns, verbs in present and past tense more than men; however, men discuss events, objects, occupations, money, and sports and use numbers, articles, prepositions, long words, and swear words more than women.

In addition to the differences in speech content and functions, women's language is also found to be different from men's in terms of its use. Research has shown that women use formal and polite forms (e.g. *Would you mind if ...*) and hedging (e.g. *I guess* or *sort of*) to reduce the force of an utterance more often than men, and they ask more questions and use more tag questions in their speech than men do (Holmes, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977; Newman et al., 2008). The explanation for such characteristics of women's speech was first put forward by Lakoff (1975) who stated that the language women use reflects their subordinate status in the society, that is, a number of linguistic features frequently used by women represent their uncertainty and lack of confidence which result from the gender-exclusive social status and how women's significant roles have been overlooked and undervalued throughout the history of humankind.

The last aspect of gender differences in language use worth discussing concerns the differences in women's and men's interaction patterns. It has been found that, in cross-gender interactions,

men are more likely to interrupt women more than the other way around, and women tend to provide more encouraging and positive feedback to their addressees than men do (Brooks, 1982; McMillan et al., 1977; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Zimmerman & West, 1975). Moreover, research on conversational interaction, in general, has found that women are "cooperative conversationalists, whereas men tend to be more competitive and less supportive of others" (Holmes, 2008, p. 309). Not only do all these findings perfectly mirror women's socially inferior status and their subordinate position, as compared with men's, in most societies, but they also represent the norm for men's and women's talk and the general context of interaction. To put it simply, women tend to be more cooperative because their talk usually takes place in private contexts where solidarity and rapports are vitally important and thus disagreement is avoided. Men, however, are more likely to interrupt and they are more competitive since their talk, usually done in public settings, is a means of getting and keeping attention and imparting information.

Gender differences and implications for language learning and teaching

All in all, the linguistic differences between men and women can be found in phonology, syntax, pragmatics, vocabulary, and patterns of conversational interaction (Gal, 1978). With regard to all of the aforementioned gender differences, several important implications for language classrooms can be drawn as follows. First of all, the teaching and using of non-sexist language should be encouraged in the classroom. Instead of using *man* and *mankind* as generic forms referring to humans in general, for example, teachers should introduce and encourage their students to use the neutral form of the word such as *humans*, *human beings*, *humankind*, and *the human race*. The same case applies to words like *businessman/businesswoman*, *chairman/chairwoman*, *fireman/firewoman*, *policeman/policewoman*, and the generic pronoun *he*, all of which should be used in their neutral equivalents such as *businessperson*, *chairperson*, *fire fighter*, *police officer*, and the neutral pronoun *he or she*, *he/she*, *s/he*, and *they*, respectively.

Secondly, since men are found to talk more in mixed-gender groups and women are more comfortable with private talk, classroom interaction should be designed in a way that provides more chances for female students to have equal share of the talking time. To achieve this goal, small group interactions should be frequently set up so that female students would be more likely

to speak up since their talk is not at the centre of whole-class attention. Similarly, teachers should constantly monitor and encourage the less talkative students, usually females, to talk more by assigning them either into small groups or same-gender groups to make them feel more confident in sharing their ideas. In addition to the small group interaction, recommended by Tannen (1992), a careful choice of topics for classroom discussion also plays a pivotal role in encouraging both male and female students to talk. As discussed above, men and women enjoy talking about different things; thus, a variety of topics ranging from personal feelings to impersonal topics would be of equal interests to both genders.

Thirdly, there are implications for publishers, curriculum and material developers, and textbook writers to take into account the unconscious influence of sexism on students' learning, particularly that of female students. As Sunderland (1992) point out, the stereotypical representation of women to have linguistically and socially limited roles in the course books does more harm than good to female students, that is, it is more likely to hamper rather than facilitate their learning. Sunderland, then, suggest having "a realistic distribution and qualitatively fair representation of female characters throughout the book" to strike a balance between male and female roles both in print and in real life (p. 87).

Finally, it should be noted that despite taking the gender-related linguistic differences into consideration, there are other factors which play significant roles in the success of a second/foreign learning such as age, personality, motivation, anxiety, and learning styles (Dörnyei, 2006; Ellis, 1994; Robinson, 2002). Many researchers, for example, agree that motivation is a predictor of success in second language learning (Dörnyei, 2006; Gass & Selinker, 1994; Lightbown & Spada, 2013); therefore, it is imperative for teachers to consider the powerful effect of motivation on language learning success. Moreover, the context and culture in which the language is learned and taught is also of the utmost importance to the language teaching and learning process, as Bax (2003, p. 286) puts it, "the learning context, including learner variables, is the key factor in successful language learning".

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