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Volume II
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HSBC Bank Malaysia Berhad
Genderised Talk: Real and Represented

Jarihl Mohd. Jan

Introduction

Studies on language and gender have sought to cast light on people’s real experiences of how men and women converse, both in single-sex and mixed-sex groups, in order to investigate the stereotypes found in our culture. These stereotypes such as the trivial, chattering, nagging woman and the strong, silent, long-suffering man - are constantly shored up by a whole range of representations, exemplified by texts in the printed media.

In general, the ideas we have about the sexes are constructed around stereotypes, and these stereotypes often encode the point of view of those who are in position to get their meanings publicised. The focus is on what our own experiences have been about male and female talk, and how this accords with research on real speech.

Genderised Talk: Differences in Styles

The different styles of talk adopted by males and females in their interaction with one another seem to have been largely ignored in communication research. Work by feminist researchers dealing with issues on gender differences began to appear in the mid-seventies. For instance, Kramer (1975) called for more research on sex-preferential differences in language use. Kramer suggests that there is a need to consider not only the possibility of differences in grammatical, phonological, and semantic aspects, but also possible differences in the verbal skills, instrumental use of language,
and the relationship of non-verbal uses to verbal behaviour. According to Kramer (1975: 43):

We need to ask if there are differences between sexes in their linguistic competence. Do women control some speech structures or vocabulary that men lack or vice versa? We need to ask if there are differences in linguistic performance. Are there syntactic structures, vocabulary, phonological rules that, say, women might know but not use while men both know and use?

Kramer’s questions have interested feminist sociolinguists and several attempts have also been made to answer these questions.

What is Gender?

In this study, the term gender is referred to as “a culturally shaped group of attributes given to the female or to the male” (Humm, 1989: 64). According to Humm, the ‘cultural shaping’ is an ongoing, lifelong process which means that basically gender is unstable and multiple or ‘non-unitary’. It is considered a changing product of a given context (e.g. public discussion), and as playing a role in constituting the social practices of that context. It takes place primarily through different discourse such as the discourses of male superiority, and of gender equity. Hence, genderised talk refers to talk in-interaction between men and women that reflects their behaviour in a society.

Doing Gender

From birth, one gender or the other is known by dint of our genital organs and from then on we enact this gender following role models and how we are expected to behave. It is not a case of simply being male or female: we do gender through gendered activities including everything we utter and the ways we are trained to interact with others.

In the context of a hierarchical society that dictates male dominance and female subordination, regardless of our individual intentions, the ways we do gender in interaction are specific, intricate and for the most part, ‘invisible’ (Uchida, 1992; West and Zimmerman, 1987). When men and women speak, they are left
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with the net result of the effects of this hierarchy often without

owing why – without knowing that they have been using pat-

terns of communication that not only reflect but also serve to con-

stitute patterns of domination and subordination. The expected

behaviour of men and women that are typical of a particular com-

munity is often stereotyped.

The Dominance Theory of Conversational Differences

The 'dominance' theory of gender differences has focused on the
distribution of power in society, and suggested that women's

peech reflects their subordinate position. It allows for the analy-

is of how asymmetrical power relations are achieved in daily in-

action. Work within this model includes Pamela Fishman's stud-

es, which claim that women do the conversational support work

that enables the conversation to happen and continue (Fishman,

80). This is realised by asking questions, introducing topics, and

aking active listening signals.

The strength of this approach is that it offers an account of

ow power is 'done' in conversations, how patriarchy can be

ained and maintained in the personal sphere between a mar-

ed couple, for example. It can also be used to explain the repro-

uction of patriarchy as children learn gender-appropriate lan-

guage use, which also teaches them their 'correct' role in society -

omination or submission. According to this model, women can,

, in theory, change their interactive patterns to subvert existing

ower relations.

The main problem identified in the 'dominance' model is that

ere is no place within it for valuing the style of speech associated

with women. The use of all the identified features is seen as a

al of submission, or lack of assertion. From the perspective of

the 'dominance' theory, to achieve parity with men, women must

ge their interactive patterns, and abandon the 'support-work'.

Secondly, the 'dominance' approach tends to treat power as mono-

thic and, as such, limits its applicability.
This publication is the result of a collaborative effort between the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics University of Malaya and HSBC Bank Malaysia Berhad and consists of selected papers from the international conference on ‘Language, Linguistics and the Real World’ 2002 held in conjunction with the Faculty’s 30th anniversary celebration of its establishment.

The papers are published in two volumes - 1) Making Linguistics Relevant and 2) Language Practices in the Workplace - which reflect the contemporary movement of the discipline from the explanation of the abstract form of the linguistic code to the context sensitive description of its communicative functions. They essentially answer the same key academic question: ‘what is the relevance of linguistics to the present day world?’ and, deriving from that, the question ‘how is language used to communicate in real world situations?’

The responses range from considerations of the nature of language itself and the ways the discipline should describe and explain it, through applications of the abstract code to express particular kinds of meaning such as politeness and responsibility, through the language of advertising and of the press to the ‘world of work’: language learning, court interpreting and the place of language in the hospital.

The two volumes provide, an insight into the way linguists are attempting to make the study of language more relevant to society and finding increasing areas in which the insights can be applied to the solution of social problems.