

Gender language
acquisition and
language use
psychology essay



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INTRODUCTION

Over the last thirty years there has been a sharp increase of research on the differences between men and women, in particular the extent to which men and women use language differently.

The purpose of this project is to identify the differences between male and female speech and how society's attitude towards gender has an impact on language acquisition and language use.

Firstly this project will introduce the subject of sociolinguistics with a focus on stereotyping, language acquisition and the general differences in speech between males and females. Secondly, current opinions and attitudes will be discussed along with recent research that has been carried out examining if gender stereotyping exists and whether it has an impact on language acquisition and the way language is used. Lastly it will analyse findings from my own research of colour terms used by a sample of 10 children.

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society, and how society influences or affects the way in which language is used by individuals or groups (Crystal, 2008). Gender Difference is a branch of sociolinguistics that focuses on how males and females communicate and what differences there are between the two sexes. Over the last 20 years research has been conducted to try and answer such questions as " Do women really talk more than men?" " Do men swear more than women?" and " Do women ' gossip' more than men".

The main differences identified between the way men and women communicate are: men's language is more dominant, aggressive, assertive, confident and forceful and women's language is submissive, cooperative, emotional and sincere (Pearson, 1985).

Research has been carried out to examine whether these differences are due to biological or social factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early research examining the relationship between gender and language was first carried out by Lakoff in 1975 and published in her book 'Language and Woman's Place'. Lakoff identified several factors that make woman's language different to men's. Women's language contains more: Hedge phrases: ' sort of', ' it seems like'; Polite forms: ' would you mind...'; Tag questions: ' you are coming to dinner, aren't you?'; Standard English and tend to avoid using expletives. Lakoff stated that women are " reluctant to force their views on another person" which explains the use of hedge phrases. This view was supported by McMillan et al (1977).

In relation to tag questions, Mulac & Lundell (1986) found similar results with their research however studies by Dubois & Crouch (1975) contradicts this as they found that men were more likely to use tag questions than women.

Holmes (1984) also disagreed with Lakoff's suggestions of tag question and found that in most cases women used them to " give the person being spoken to an opportunity to speak".

Lakoff's research also found that women notice more detail than men

causing women to be more perceptive; they notice things such as tone of
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voice, facial expression, and body language. She noted that women use a greater variety of descriptions when describing colours, ('violet' instead of 'purple' or 'crimson' rather than 'red').

Glass (1992) carried out research to identify biological differences and found that in males the right hemisphere of the brain matures faster than the left where as the opposite occurs in females with the left hemisphere of the brain developing first. Therefore men are more adept at right hemisphere tasks such as solving mathematical problems while women are better with left hemisphere tasks such as developing language and vocabulary.

Differences that arise due to social factors could be due to the fact that there is an element of sexism in language which instils gender stereotyping. Words that represent women or refer to women tend to have negative connotations (Romaine, 2008). If we look at the words that describe a single male (bachelor) and a single female (spinster), for many people the word 'bachelor' would imply a young, single, professional male with prospects where as the word 'spinster' would suggest a lonely, old female, yet they both mean the same for each gender.

Nilsen (1977) carried out research using 500 dictionary words which had either male or female connotations. 385 were found to have male connotations compared to only 132 with female connotations. Nilsen looked at the words for negative connotations and found that the number of words with negative female connotations outweighed the number of male ones by 25%.

There has been a lot of research examining whether the impact of gender stereotyping at an early age has had an influence in the use of language. Eisenberg et al (1985) found that parents will more often than not choose toys that are associated with their child's gender. Caldera (1989) looked at the type of toys children play with and the role they have in language development. He found that boy's toys such as cars and trains have low levels of teaching and questioning and require little or no interaction with a parent. Boys will often mimic the sounds related to the toy (e. g. " beep beep" for a car or " choo choo" for a train) but the toy requires no conversation. In contrast, girl's toys such as dolls and prams require a certain amount of role play that elicits constant verbal interaction with the toy with the child giving a step by step account of what will happen next (e. g. " it is now time for your nap"), which often leads to a parent becoming more involved making comments and questioning (Caldera, 1989).

By the end of a child's first year gender differences are already evident in the way they play and dress and the way adults interact and communicate with them. Parents will typically choose to dress a boy in blue or a girl in pink because that is what gender stereotyping dictates. Pearson & Davilla (2001) found that baby boys are often described as strong, solid and independent where as baby girls are described as loving, cute and sweet thus reinforcing gender stereotypes.

This type of gender stereotyping has also been found to occur in school textbooks with language often emphasising the ideas of males and females (Cameron, 2007). The use of terms like ' he', ' him' and ' his', and ' men'

when referring to a person or people reinforces gender language with
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females made to look inferior to males. Males and females are typically represented in traditional gender roles with women as mothers and housewives, and men as professional breadwinners. Again women are portrayed in more submissive and inferior roles. This was more noticeable with reading schemes from the 1960s and 1970s. Males are also seen as having more opportunities than females as they are portrayed as being more adventurous and physically stronger than women. Females seem more caring and are seen as more interested in domestic matters taking a submissive role to allow male dominance.

However Bradley (1981) and Weatherall (2002) have argued that there are no significant differences between male and female speech.

METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain comparable data I needed to ask a sample of children to look at a picture and give the name of each colour of a specific object within the picture. As this research was to be conducted during the Christmas season I used a sample of children who were attending a Christmas party.

I devised a questionnaire which contained a colourful Christmas themed picture of Santa flying his sleigh along with five questions asking to name the colour of different objects within the picture (Appendix 1). The picture chosen had different shades of colour in order to allow a variety of answers for a particular object.

The research was carried out on a small scale using a mixture of interpretive and positivist methods. A sample size of 10 children was used ranging from

age 4 to 9 with an equal number of males and females to allow a more accurate comparison of data relating to gender.

The children sampled were enjoying themselves at a Christmas party. Each child was sat down individually at a quiet table and asked to describe the colour of the various objects in each question. They were also asked their age. The time taken to answer the questions was an average of 4 minutes per child.

FINDINGS

I have analysed the findings for each question individually in order to compare the differences between genders.

Q. 1. What colour is Santa's hat?

In the picture, Santa's hat is a standard red colour therefore it is not surprising that 'red' was the answer given by 100% of the children.

Q. 2. What colour is the sky?

The sky is a shade of blue which could be described as a light blue or sky blue. 80% of the boys gave the answer 'blue' where as this answer was only given by 20% of the girls. 'Sky blue' was the most popular answer which was given by 60% of the girls. Light blue was given by 20% of girls and 20% of boys.

Q. 3 What colour is Rudolph?

Rudolph is a brown colour that could be described in a number of ways. 80% of boys answered 'brown' compared to 40% of girls. Interestingly one girl (20%) gave the answer 'nutmeg' while a second girl (20%) answered 'fawn' and a third girl (20%) answering 'light brown'. 'Fawn brown' was also given by 20% of boys.

Q. 4. What colour is Rudolph's scarf?

Rudolph's scarf is a dark shade of green. 'Green' was the answer given by 80% of boys and 80% of girls. Only two other shades were given; 'moss green' (20% boys) and 'sage' (20% of girls).

Q. 5. What colour is Santa's sleigh?

Santa's sleigh is red but it is a much darker shade of colour than his hat. Of the boys sampled, 80% gave the answer 'red' with only one boy (20%) giving a different answer of 'burgundy'. None of the girls gave the simple answer of 'red'. 60% distinguished that it was a much darker red than Santa's hat and therefore described it as 'dark red'. One girl (20%) gave the answer 'maroon' and another girl (20%) gave the answer 'burgundy'.

The table below shows the results along with each Child's gender and age:

Response to Questions

Child

Gender

Age

Q. 1

Q. 2

Q. 3

Q. 4

Q. 5

A

M

8

Red

Light Blue

Fawn Brown

Moss Green

Burgundy

B

M

8

Red

Blue

Brown

Green

Red

C

M

9

Red

Blue

Brown

Green

Red

D

M

4

Red

Blue

Brown

Green

Red

E

M

7

Red

Blue

Brown

Green

Red

F

F

6

Red

Sky Blue

Nutmeg

Sage

Maroon

G

F

7

Red

Light Blue

Fawn

Green

Burgundy

H

F

5

Red

Blue

Brown

Green

Dark Red

I

F

6

Red

Sky Blue

Light Brown

Green

Dark Red

J

F

6

Red

Sky Blue

Brown

Green

Dark Red

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

The results show that females take more notice of details than males as the female children were more perceptive when looking at the picture and therefore gave a greater variety of colour descriptions. These results agree with Lakoff's research of 'Language and Women's Place'.

Lakoff's research was published more than thirty years ago and her specific claims about the way language is used by woman have been overturned as more recent research does not support them as the research was based on intuition. (Cameron, 2007). However, Lakoff's arguments that language-use, gender and power are all connected is still supported (Cameron, 2007).

Individual differences may account for some of the variations in the results. Child A, a male child, gave colour terms of Red, Light Blue, Fawn Brown, Moss Green and Burgundy which suggests that other social factors besides gender stereotyping may have an influence.

The way people use language is affected by the context of the situation they are in and to whom they are engaging in conversation with (Cameron, 2007). Holmes (1984) uses the analogy of a tightrope to explain:

"Women are obliged to walk a 'tightrope of impression management', continually demonstrating their professional competence while also making

clear that they have not lost their femininity - that they are not, for example, aggressive or uncaring" (Cameron, 2007).

Factors such as socio economic background, parent influence and other interests may have a direct effect on language acquisition and needs to be researched further.

CONCLUSION

The differences between males and females can be attributed to biological and social factors. Research by Glass (1992) shows that the brain develops differently in males and females which results in the two genders having a preference for tasks that are associated with that part of their brain that matures faster.

Social factors such as gender stereotyping has a significant influence on language use as it helps to reinforce the roles that society dictates men and women should have. Gender stereotyping occurs from birth

Females use language as a way to develop personal relationships where as men use language to assert independence and status.

People adapt their language to different contexts therefore gender differences is a difficult area to study. Gender alone cannot account for differences in language use and as such other factors such as socio economic background, education and individual differences should be taken in to account.

Much of the research carried out has identified what the differences are between male and female speech but with little suggestions as to why these differences occur.

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