

Language and gender essay

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



Language is a tool that is believed to be unique to the human species. It is believed that on earth we are the only species to have developed the capacity to utilise language as a tool. It is considered to be the most powerful tool that we as modern humans have in our arsenal as it allows us to pass on our knowledge from one generation to the next, in a variety of methods be it verbal or written. It is what allowed us to not only survive but to thrive. During the last ice age it gave us a distinct advantage over other species that became extinct. Neanderthal man while being evolved from the same source species did not have the same capacity for language that we did because of this they became extinct. We were able to survive because we had a strong sense of community and because of language we were able to adapt and develop the skills necessary for survival.

In modern society this tool has evolved into thousands of languages, accents and dialects. Differences in the way men and women use speech has appeared and they occur regardless of our social background, or our level of education. There are several factors that influence how people use language. Gender has been identified as a major influence. The study of language led to a set of conventions being put forward by Paul Grice known as Grice's Maxim's. These facilitate effective conversation.

These maxims are the maxim of quality, where you say just what is needed to respond. The maxim of relevance ensures that what is said is relevant within the content of the conversation. The maxim of manner requires that you are courteous, well mannered and polite. The maxim of quality requires responding truthfully and able to support what you are saying with clear evidence. Also developed was the structure of conversation which said that

all conversations have; an opening, which is the initial greeting. Turn taking ensuring that you wait for the person to finish speaking before you talk. Features of this are the actual content and topic. Feedback, the response to what was said.

A closing, the conclusion of a conversation. However it was found that there are differences in the way that men and women talk in different situations as they perceive their roles differently. This difference in our use of language has been investigated by many sociolinguists. These studies were prompted by the rise of feminism in the USA in the late 1960s and 1970s. This movement was the catalyst for many language studies. One of the prominent pioneers of these studies was Robin Lakoff (1975) who published a set of basic assumptions about women's language. She proposed that women's speech can be distinguished from that of men in a number of ways as they tend to consider themselves as inferior to men, they tend to use hedges, using phrases such as ' sort of,' ' kind of,' ' it seems like'.

They use empty adjectives such as divine, adorable, gorgeous. They tend to speak in super-polite forms by starting their sentences with ' Would you mind...' '...if it's not too much to ask' ' Is it ok if...? ', they apologize more ' I'm sorry, but I think that...'. They speak less frequently and avoid coarse language or expletives.

They convert their comment into a request by using Tag questions ' You don't mind eating this, do you? ' Their sentences have more hyper-correct grammar and pronunciation with their use of prestige grammar and clear articulation. Their requests are more indirect ' Wow, I'm so thirsty. ' when

really asking for a drink. Women speak in italics use tone to emphasis certain words, e. g. , ‘ so’, ‘ very’, ‘ quite’.

She also developed the ‘ Politeness Principle’, which devised three maxims that are usually followed in interaction. These are: Don’t impose, give the receiver options and make the receiver feel good. She stated that these are paramount in good interaction. By not adhering to these maxims, a speaker is said to be ‘ flouting the maxims’. (ask. com 2010) Reasons proposed for the differences in female speech are that these assumptions have inspired other people to conduct their own studies into language. Lakoff, 1975) The typical features of male speech are; it is considered to be the accepted norm in society.

It is seen as referential and competitive. Their speech is more direct and to the point and swearing and taboo is more accepted. Men interrupt women more often and ask more questions.

Men do not apologise or compliment very often. They view language as a tool to have power over women which shows that men tend to see themselves as superior to women. By looking at the type of words men use it shows that language is a male oriented and discourse tends to relate to more generic subjects such as sport, money, jobs. This is due to the fact that men tend to view themselves as being superior and this is reflected in the way they speak. The typical features of female speech are that their speech is seen as deviant. They are more affectionate and collaborative, use more hedges, use tag questions and tend to be more polite than men. They use more empty adjectives and tend to use intensifiers.

They are said to lack a sense of humour and their speech is more direct. In conversation with men the women find it difficult to become involved and are more hesitant. This shows that women tend to see themselves as inferior as they are not as dominant. Their use of tag questions shows indecisiveness in conversation with men.

If they have a point to make they will phrase the question in such a way to influence the conversation. It is their intention to try to get the man to produce the point which indicates a fear of rejection. Women believe that if the male is the source of the point there is a higher possibility of being listened to. In conversation with other women they tend to talk about specific subjects such as children, marriage, shopping. This is due to the fact that women are viewed as being the home makers and responsible for looking after the children. The main approaches to explain these differences can be put down to the differences between the roles men and women traditionally held in society. The family unit is seen as a reason for these differences.

As young children we see our fathers as the alpha, the main provider of the family. As boys grow up they strive to live up to their fathers expectations. The girls however grow up wanting to be their ‘daddies little angel’ whose sole purpose is to please their father and as they grow up they see men as their superiors. The traditional role of the mother in society is to look after the children and the house while the men are out at work.

These roles are equalising out now with more men staying at home assuming a female’s role while the women go to work, assuming the male’s role. Increasingly, over the last decade or so the traditional family unit is

becoming a thing of the past and as such children are growing up with a different sense of self being. As a result the use of language between men and women is evolving. Research carried out by Deborah Tannen uncovered six main differences in the way men and women talk. Status versus support found that men tended to be more competitive and would strive to obtain the upper hand in conversation where as woman tended to be more supportive in conversation and avoid confrontation. Independence versus intimacy found that men tended to be more independent and do not like asking for permission. Women tend to look for closeness and support.

In advice versus understanding Tannen found that when people complain in conversation men tend to offer advice or look for a solution where as women tend to be more understanding. Information versus feelings found that men tended to use speech to portray information and keep their feelings hidden yet women tend to express their feelings more openly. Orders versus proposals found that men tended to interpret what is being said differently to women. For example when someone makes a suggestion starting with the word 'lets' men tend see it as an order, where as a woman would see it as a suggestion. Conflict versus compromise revealed that women tended to avoid conflict and go with the flow therefore end up having to compromise. Men on the other hand tend to enjoy conflict they seek it out in it various forms. This comes from the human nature of being hunter gatherers, and competing for the food. In my experience of studying male and female speech I would agree with all the studies carried out.

While there are individuals who do not follow the trends, the majority of people do fall within the trend derived from the studies. I have found that when men get together in a social setting they tend to strike up a debate about a range of subjects and each man in that group will tend to have an opinion on the subject. They are more likely to show competitiveness and jockey to prove they know the most about the subject. Generally there will be someone playing devil's advocate which adds intentional dispute in the debate.

Whereas when a group of women get together they strike up a discussion and in the event of difference of opinion they will look to compromise and try to see each others point of view. I have noticed that women talk more openly about feelings and personal problems where as men tend to be more decisive and confrontational. It is found that while men do most of the talking they do not communicate as effectively as women. In conclusion it is clear there are differences between men and women in the way in which they behave in discourse. However, there are currently no clear explanations for this. Language is of paramount importance to the structure of modern society.

While it might be possible to suggest reasons for the differences between the use of language between the genders there can never be a definitive explanation for these differences and in any case, language is constantly changing and in a state of flux. BibliographyAsk. com Encyclopaedia (2010) [Online] available from: http://www.sk.com/wiki/Robin_Lakoff [accessed

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