

# Gender differences in aspects of english language use



Language is largely influenced by socialization, shaped by conditioning and constant reinforcement. When parents speak to children they address boys and girls in different ways. In general, girls are treated more gently and spoken to more softly. Boys are encouraged to play roughly, to make a noise and to be expressive, but not to cry. Girls are encouraged to be less rowdy and may cry but not shout. They are discouraged from expressing anger.

For boys, behavioural expectations are reinforced with expressions like You throw like a girl, and Big boys don't cry. As children develop, these differences begin to show more clearly in language. They become part of the communication style that is there for life. According to Mayor, B (1996, page 64), as they mature girls and boys increasingly differentiate their language use to reflect their gender roles. Girls use more indirect language than boys, and are more likely to modify their speech styles in varying contexts.

Studies of children's play behaviour demonstrate that boys are competitive and confrontational, and concentrate on the physical world, whereas girls are indirect, collaborative and are interested in motives and feelings. (Maybin, 1996 page 19). Generally speaking, boys and men are assertive, independent and objective. Girls and women are submissive, dependent and subjective. Of course, there is a wide range of communication styles and practices within each gender group, with most men and women using various conversation styles depending on the purpose and context, and also whether they are in single sex groups.

In mixed company women usually talk less than men, and are more polite. They are less competitive and try to bring others into the conversation. This

could be because women are brought up to be deferential to men. They are more hesitant and indirect, use more tag questions (isn't it? don't you think?), more polite forms (could you possibly?) and generally weaker vocabulary (words like lovely and Oh dear). (Maybin, 1996 page 19).

Men on the other hand, interrupt more and give less feedback and support. In situations that require formal conversation, such as at conferences, business meetings, or other mixed-gender gatherings, men tend to initiate more of the interaction. Those who talk most are perceived to be leaders. (Coates, 1998, p. 469).

Amongst themselves, women tend to talk more. They show more concern for the relational aspects of conversation. In exclusively male groups, men tend to focus more on activities than on conversation (Coates, 1998, p. 216).

Of course, these are generalised descriptions of behaviour, and both sexes are able to modify their styles depending on the context. Maybin (1996, page 19) quotes a study of courtroom language in which high-status, expert female witnesses used masculine speaking styles, whilst lower status male witnesses used female style features.

Dr. John Gray (author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*) says that women communicate for different reasons than men do. When men talk about problems, they are looking for solutions, whereas when women discuss problems they are sharing their feelings, because they find this therapeutic. In this context what women would like from men is empathy, and not solutions.

The table on the following page shows clear differences in communication styles between men and women.

Men

Women

They try to solve problems and troubles

They try to match troubles by relating similar negative experiences

They have a more analytical approach to problems

They have a more emotional approach to problems

They are less likely to ask for help. They try to figure things out on their own

They are more likely to ask for help and accept it

They are more task-oriented (i. e., " What is everyone going to do?")

They are more maintenance-oriented (i. e., " Is everyone all right?")

They appear less intuitive and less aware of details

They appear more intuitive and more aware of details

They have more difficulty in expressing intimate feelings

They have less difficulty in expressing intimate feelings

They are more apt to yell, shout and swear to release anger

They are more apt to cry to release anger

They talk more about what they did, where they went and less about relationships with others

They talk more about how they feel and more about relationships with others

They tend to take verbal rejection less personally

They tend to take verbal rejection more personally

(Glass, L. (1995) page 49).

English has a natural gender, unlike many other languages. (Of course, it was not always so; before 1154, Old English nouns still used the Anglo-Saxon derived genders. (Bryson, B, 1990, page 49)). This means that words like woman, cow, ewe, are feminine because of their biological sex. In the same way, bull, boy and tomcat are masculine. This natural gender refers only to animals and not to objects. Historically, certain professions acquired genders: doctors, lawyers, politicians, engineers, architects and ministers were invariably male. Nurses, nannies and typists tended to be female. Nowadays, all of these professions are correctly gender-free. There are also words with male endings such as chairman, postman and fireman, which now have alternatives: chairperson, postal worker and fire-fighter.

Regarding creative writing, women authors have tended to be under represented in most selections of literary texts. Writers such as the Brontë sisters and Mary Anne Evans had to adopt male noms de plume (respectively

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Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, and George Elliot) even to get published. Apart from this gender based discrimination, there is also a strong feeling amongst many writers that the written, literary language itself was for so long a male preserve, that woman writers need their own idiom. In Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the heroine Bathsheba explains that It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs (Quoted in Menham, R. 1995, page 136). Menham also quotes from Virginia Woolf, who appeals for a new kind of writing that will take the natural shape of a woman's thought without crushing or distorting it. In *A Room of One's Own* she says that the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence in order for female sensibility to be adequately explored. She also associates maleness with a sterile rationalism and the aims of control and regulation, and femaleness with a fertile indiscipline, spontaneity, plenitude, a creative irrationalism. (Menham, R (1995) page 137).

Referring to the work of French theorist Hélène Cixous, Menham feels that her celebration of woman's writing effects a great historical reversal of the traditional strengths and weaknesses of male and female language-use. It gives a positive value to precisely those qualities that men have always derogated in women: hysteria, lack of force, sensitivity. (Menham, R (1995) page 138.)

In conclusion, there is no doubt that there are differences in English language use, both in speech and writing, based on gender. Most of these seem to be as a result of socialisation from an early age.

The different, traditional gender roles and expectations coloured the way children were raised and educated, and in many respects these influences are still in place. Hopefully, as modern societies eliminate the largely artificial stereotypes of gender based roles and behaviours, we will all be able to experience, and articulate, the full panoply of human emotional and intellectual experience, regardless of gender.