Sociolinguistic research essay

The interest in the way women and men talk has grown astronomically since the mid-1970s, and sociolinguistic research carried out in many different cultures means that we now know far more than we did about the ways in which women and men interact and about the ways in which their patterns of talk differ. Early research on gender differences in language tended to focus on mixed talk, that is, talk involving both women and men. Initially, researchers concentrated on what were seen as core features of language: phonetics and phonology, syntax and morphology. Then researchers began to turn their attention to broader aspects of talk, the conversational strategies of male and female speakers. More recently, researchers have started to look at single-sex interaction and to ask questions such as: how do speakers ‘ do gender’, and is gender performed differently in single-sex-groups? This work to some extent retraces this historical route, in terms of both matter and approach.

It starts with focusing on pronunciation and grammar (Part I). It then moves on focusing on conversational strategies of male informal language (Part II) taking various papers exploring language and masculinity into consideration. Part III compares all-male to all-female interaction. The final (Part IV) section is devoted to own empirical data which will be analyzed and compared with the results of previous studies.

The research focusing specifically on male speakers particularly in informal settings is still relatively rare which is the reason why this work is bound to only quote limited sources. In contrast to mixed-sex talk, same-sex talk gives researchers a concrete basis to analyse women’s and men’s linguistic usage outside a dominance framework. In this case it is possible to assess men’s

conversational strategies in terms other than dominance. Intonational characteristics are a prominent feature of intuitive descriptions of typically masculine and feminine speech. Terrango studied the acoustical characteristics of 14 male voices From studies concerning variables that are not determined by or defined in terms of units of pronunciation or grammar, attention is turned to studies of variables that are so defined: The most basic units of segmental analysis are the set of sounds, called ‘ phonemes’, that are recognized as meaningfully distinct and non-interchangeable by the speakers of a language. Words and parts of words are pronounced in a great variety of different ways without changing the interpretation that is placed upon them although these variations may have important implications effeminate assessment notice recognize innocuous unanimously tendency besides and stabilize performance Talking in classes: Talking in class – an illustration Graddol and Swann (1989) identify the following studies of classroom interaction which indicate that boys talk more than girls: Elliott (1974), Spender (1982), French and French (1984a), Sadker and Sadker, (1985).

Sadker and Sadkeer found that, “ in a study of over 100 classes, boys spoke on average three times as much as girls. ” Clarricoates, 1983 discusses evidence for the claim that teachers pay more attention to boys, giving then both more disapproval as well as praise. Spender (1982) found that she spent 38% of her time interacting with girls she taught, even though her intention was to divide her time equally. Whyte (1986) found that teachers involved with the Girls into Science and Technology Project were able to divide their time equally when they made a conscious effort. Stanworth

(1981), Spender (1982), Carricoates (1983) found that boys are more disruptive than girls and French and French (1984a) suggest that boys use a variety of strategies to ensure greater teacher attention.

Graddol and Swann present a video analysis of discussions between a teacher and small groups of primary school children. They claim that boys' greater participation in talk comes from the interaction of pupil and teacher behaviour: Teachers encouraged boys through eye contact. Talkative boys succesfully observed the rules of co-operative discourse (they butted in when it was allowed, they put their hands up when it was required etc. Girls were able to succesfully " read" these different contexts too, but used their knowledge to avoid participation in the group (Swann & Graddol, 1988). They summarise their views: " We suspect that girls were also accomplices here(..

.)although researchers often talk of men (or boys) as " dominating " talk this needn't mean there is a struggle to gain speaking turns. Both quiet and talkative participants (and teachers, in the case of classromm discussions) may play a part in ensuring male dominance. " (page 72).

Leet-Pellegrini (1980) studied amount of talk in relation to sex and expertise. She found that " talk was associated with both speaker sex and expertise": " Men talked more than women; " experts" talked more than " non-experts"; and male " experts" talked more than female " experts", particularly in relation to female partners. " (Graddol and Swann). Phillipsen (1975) carried out a study of a working class neighbourhood in a US town and found that men " disvalued" speech as a way of presenting themselves. Speech was used to express solidarity within a working class group, but in formal

situations men made use of intermediaries and representatives (local politician, union representative etc.

Non-verbal responses to insults were more common than speech. Graddol and Swann conclude that, “ particular linguistic features may be used for certain puposes and effects in conversation, but you cannot say that one feature always and unambiguously has the same function – nor that one function has always to be fulfilled by the same feature. To be able to understand the function of different aspects of a conversation one needs considerable knowledge of the context in which this takes place: in a context in which people routinely had recourse to physical violence, perhaps a dominant person could affford to be a man of few words. ” (page 74).