

Gender Differences in Language as Affected by Social Roles

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Abstract: Variations in language, besides other factors, seem to be direct and significant products of gender variable. The division of society into men and women, both being different and complex, is reflected in various forms in language which is the most important means of communication among them. The article will focus on variations related to gender of speakers. It will reveal differences that are found in the language of women and men, and will link these differences with the social roles that are assigned to them in Albanian society (and other countries) as well as with the socio-cultural environment where they live. Hence we will present gender-related peculiarities that give insight into the position of women and their status. It appears that rules laid upon them have made their language more hesitant, indirect and euphemistic. However, their speech inevitably reveals their expressive and emotional nature especially while relating to their children.

Keywords: women's language, social role, division of labour, euphemism, silence.

1. Introduction

The last several decades have witnessed an increase in research on the nature and existence of differences between men and women. One particularly popular question has been the extent to which men and women use language differently. This popularity stems, in part, from the fact that language is an inherently social phenomenon and can provide insight into how men and women approach their social worlds (Newman et al. 2008). This whole body of research also accounts for the lack of agreement over the best way to analyze language.

Coates and Johnson (2001) pointed out that the study of language provides a uniquely “social” perspective on the study of gender differences. Given that our understanding of other human beings is heavily dependent on language, the average differences in communication style that we report are likely to play a central role in the maintenance of gender stereotypes and may perpetuate the perception of a “kernel of truth” that underlies those stereotypes.

In this research we have chosen to examine gender differences in language use under the perspective of social roles. Social role theory was introduced by social psychologist Alice Eagly in 1987. It suggests that the sexual division of labor and societal expectations based on stereotypes produce gender roles. As such, women and men behave in gender-typed ways because the social roles that they perform are associated with different expectations and require different skills. For example, because women are caregivers for children more often than are men, they more frequently exhibit traditionally feminine behaviors such as nurturance and a concern over personal relationships. Whereas men are more likely to be perceived as aggressive and competitive and have traditionally been viewed as financial providers. The gendered division of labor in society relies heavily on the allocation of women's function to the domestic, or private, realm and men's to the public realm.

It is a well-known fact that women worldwide have had since at the beginning of society organization a secondary status and as Trudgill puts it language simply reflects this social fact.

The paper will focus on linguistic variations related to the gender of the speaker. It will reveal differences found in the speech of women and men in areas such as lexicon and will relate these differences to the social roles assigned to men and women in Albanian culture and beyond.

2. Division of labour

It is only relatively recently that sociolinguists have returned their attention to gender. Coates (2004) explains that one of the reasons is linked with changes in the position of women in contemporary society. In traditional dialectology, the informants selected were typically non-mobile, older, rural and male (Chambers and Trudgill 1980:33). It was only in the late 1980s that studies appeared which concentrated on female speakers (Bate and Tylor 1988, Coates and Cameron 1989). Until relatively recently, men were automatically seen as the heart of society, with women being peripheral or even invisible (Coates 2004:5).

The pioneering book *Language and Woman's Place* of Robin Lakoff was the first influential account of women's language. We think that the publication of this book in 1975 was not coincidental given the fact that in the 1970s women continued to challenge traditional gender roles that confined them to work as child bearers and housewives, or kept them in routine, low-status positions. Lakoff (1973, 1975) strongly endorsed the idea that language reflected women's secondary status in society.

In Albania we must say that the first scholars to carry out research in this area are Eqerem Çabej and Gjovalin Shkurtaj. Academic Çabej, since at the beginning of his studies in the years 1940s of the twentieth century, first spoke of a "women's language" in the framework of euphemisms since women's language has been considered as hesitant. Following him, but widening the focus of study, linguist Shkurtaj has devoted special attention to gender as a sociolinguistic variable in his books "Sociolinguistics" and "Ethnography of Speaking", bringing into view ethnolinguistic features of women's language in Albania.

In an effort to understand and to trace differences in gender discourse, it is necessary to shed light on the factors that lead to a language stratification, such as mentality, traditions, but also the different temperament and character of women and men. Members of all societies judge both sexes on the basis of these oppositions: men are strong, women are weak; men are aggressive, women are passive, men are reserved, women are emotional, men are rational, women are irrational, men are direct, women are indirect, men are competitive, women are cooperative.

Many may object to these as actual descriptions, or as ideals to be aimed, but we all agree that these are part of the general image we have for men and women. These traditional oppositions of both sexes are closely linked with social division of labor, and, as we shall see below, this is not simply a division of physical and mental labor, but of emotional labor as well.

Given that some activities require a greater strength and have a higher prestige, division of labor can be a division of values as well: across societies it is closely related to power and status. So, men, being physically stronger, have taken on jobs that require more physical strength, or have a greater social impact, through the disposition of goods and services. While the traditional position of women is seen at home and away from the public domain. Such a division of labour cannot but result in a social division of speaking, ways of expression, a greater frequency of certain words.

As aforementioned, there is an emotional division of labour between men and women. No matter where they are, women are expected more than men to remember birthdays, to heal the wounds of children, to offer intimate understanding. On the contrary, men tend to judge, to advise or provide solutions to mechanical problems. Women care for the needs of others, as a result in their lexicon there are words and expressions associated with house and its furniture, especially with cleaning and laundry, feeding, caring for children, cooking utensils and etc. Everything is included in the folk Albanian saying 'women's work and women's words' (Shkurtaj:1999).

Women, as bearers of children, are assigned not only to delivering them, but to raising and nurturing them, processes of which have made their language more empathetic. In literature as we know, it is talked about a difference of women's language, especially in terms of frequency of words with diminutive suffixes showing affection (Shkurtaj: 2004). Thus, part of their speech are expressions such as in Albanian: *hënëz e mamit, yllka e motrës, doçkat e tua*. Parents in English-speaking countries too use more diminutives (*kitty, dogie*) when speaking to girls than to boys (as quoted in Eckert 2003:16) and they use more inner state

words (*happy, sad*) again when speaking to girls. Expressions of women closer to emotions of everyday life can also be found in Albanian: *Drita e syrit! Drita e shtëpisë! Ylli i motrës!*

Benevolent swearing (cursing followed by a compliment), is another feature of their language: *Të hëngërt mortja, sa e mirë je bërë! Të marrtë e mira të marrtë sa e bukur dukesh!*

That shyness that women show while approaching their children is also found in communication with others where they use tropes: *i jap gjoks fëmijës, e ushqej, i jap të pijë, qan fëmija për gjë*. . To pamper their children, women usually use spoiling and pampering words by dropping the last syllable at the end of the word (apocope): *ma* (for *mami*), *ba* (for *babi*), *no* (for *nënë*), *xha* (for *xhaxhi*), *xhi, teto* (for uncle's wife on their fathers' side), *gege, dajkë* (referring to uncle's wife on their mother's side).

Observing the communication of children we find that it is achieved by the childlike model utterances (Baby talk). Baby talk is characterized among other things, by the shortening of syllables and sounds at the beginning of words, a phonetic phenomenon known as aphaeresis. This way of communication is facilitated by women to ease pronunciation, because young children find it difficult to articulate vibrant consonants and elongated words.

Thus, wanting to identify with the language of children, in mothers' vocabulary we may find variants such as: *piti i mamit* (instead of *shpirti*), *eja te mushi* (abbreviation of *Mamush*), *lola logël* (*dora e vogël*). Such features would sound weird in men's language, because wanting to maintain "the authority" of the man; they do not caress their children and are not involved in the process of feeding and raising them.

It is special elements as such that build communication with the child and mother, which make the language of women significantly different from that of men, in an important aspect of language such as vocabulary.

3. Assertiveness-The Power of Expression

Relative status that is assigned to men and women in society has affected the strength expressed through language, as the most important means of communicating ideas and opinions. And it is women who are faced with an old tradition, in which her social role has been reduced. Restrictive mentality has dictated them where, when, how and with whom they can speak. In an effort to achieve more freedom of expression, women seem to have searched for linguistic devices that give them more power and better support their opinions.

In his chapter dedicated to women in the book entitled *Language: It's Nature, Development and Origin* (1922), Jespersen found that women widely used adverbs. He argues that this is a distinctive trait: the fondness of women for hyperbole will very often lead the fashion with regard to adverbs of intensity, and these are very often with disregard of their proper meaning (Jespersen 1922:250).

Other linguists as well have criticized this feature of women's language; they consider it as an artificial tool by which women aimed to express their power of thinking. The excessive use of adverbial forms is gently mocked by Jane Austen in *Nothanger Abbey* (1813), in the speech of Isabella Thorpe.

"My attachments are always *excessively* strong."

"I must confess there is something *amazingly* insipid about her."

"I am so vexed with all the men for not admiring her!- I scold them all *amazingly* about it." (as cited by Coates 2004:11).

The use of adverbial forms of this kind was a fashion at this time, and was associated with women's speech.

The little adverb *so* in conjunction with an adjective is more frequent in women's than in men's language, as noticed by both Jespersen and Lakoff. However, they provide different explanations for this gendered-preferential usage. 'Women-explains Jespersen-much more often than men break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say' (1922:250).

Referring to so Lakoff draws a distinction between these two sentences: *I like him very much* and *I like him so much*. To say the former would be to show you feelings quite openly to a great extent. Whereas it is safer to use the latter for it weasels on that intensity. That is because, according to Lakoff, women are not to disclose strong emotions, or to make strong assertions.

It appears that men do not face such problems. In conflict situations, for example, when they want to express their physical strength they accompany it quite often with verbal violence. It is namely men who tend to use 'vulgar language'.

And we would like to focus a little bit on this subject, because the belief that women's language is more polite, more refined-in a word, more lady like-is very widespread and has been current for many years (Coates 2004:13). Presumably there have always been taboos on language, but it looks as if the courtly tradition of the Middle Ages, which put women on a pedestal, strengthened linguistic taboos in general, and also condemned the use of vulgar language by women, and its use by men in front of women.

The belief that women are limited in the use of vulgar language is still widely held. Lakoff made the following observation:

a. *Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.*

b. *Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.*

Lakoff (1975:10) comments that it is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as part of 'women's language', the second as 'men's language'.

Jespersen with regard to swearing says: 'There are great differences with regard to swearing between different nations; but I think that in those countries and in those circles in which swearing is common it is found much more extensively among men than among women: this is at any rate true in Denmark'(1922:246).

Avoidance of swearing and of 'coarse' words is held up to female speakers as the ideal to be aimed (as is silence, as we shall see below). If a female speaker talked rough she would be scolded, and an instant critical reaction would follow: 'Hey, but you're a woman!'. It is also clear that, as Maltz & Broker (1982) outline, the socialization process through which boys and girls proceed is different. Girls learn to be accommodating, compliant, and polite, while a greater degree of assertiveness, competitiveness and aggressive linguistic behaviour is tolerated from boys.

As the result women's speech is filled with hesitations, euphemisms; women deliberately avoid vulgar language. Because of their social role women tend to be polite and socially correct in behavior; they are more likely than men to be reserved and elegant in their linguistic behaviour.

As Lakoff puts it: 'Women don't use off-color or indelicate expressions, women are the experts at euphemisms'(1975: 55). Albanian scholar Cabej held the same view. In clearly defining euphemisms he stresses their social aspect; one of the motives that leads to the use of euphemisms is fear for not wanting to hurt somebody's feelings and shame. Euphemisms may be used to hide unpleasant or disturbing ideas, even when the literal term for them is not necessarily offensive. This is the case of euphemisms on taboo words such as those on sexuality. Sometimes, using euphemisms is equated to politeness.

4. Silence and verbosity

Proverbial aphorism that speech is silver, but silence is golden seems to apply especially to women. They are so often reminded about that golden silence that not only reflects sagacity but also-and even more importantly-obedience and submission (Edwards 2009:138). The image of silent woman is often held up as an ideal-'Silence the best ornament of a woman' (English proverb).

This idea is also supported by the theory of 'muted groups' proposed by anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener (Ardener 1975, 1978). Women (and minorities) are considered muted groups because they are considered to be lower in status or subordinates than the dominant groups. They cannot easily express their perceptions or experiences. These perceptions and experiences must first be filtered through or translated

into the dominant (patriarchal) system of communication. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men (Kramarae 1981: 454).

In many cultures women are silenced by rules or customs laid down by the dominant group (e.g. women are not supposed to speak in synagogues or other religious settings). Restrictions on expression for women has been recognized in Albania as well: 'Woman ... is suppressed and suffocated from the heavy yoke of education that does not recommend and order other than prohibition: Don't touch, don't go out, don't speak, don't laugh, don't do this, don't do that as educator wishes' (Stermilli 1982:64). And despite the overwhelming desire to change things woman has no other choice but to remain subject to social constraints: 'But, alas, am not a guy and as woman I cannot utter a single word' (Stermilli 1982:51).

Limited and patriarchal mindsets have emerged in Albanian families, and have imposed on them the same linguistic behavior. Social constraints in communication were observed in wedding ceremony and although they have become less rigid, they have accompanied the young brides throughout their life in the new family. The tradition of silence has had a wide geographic spread, from south to north, and time span too. Earliest evidence is found in the work of Edith Durham (1990) who said that after the first week of the ceremony, the bride could be seen at any hour of the day and should not say a word, but must stand still, just as much frozen as before.

Silence is a fine Jewel for a Woman; but it's little worn. (English proverb)

Although silence is the desired state for women, there is an age-old belief that women talk too much. Dale Spender once suggested an explanation: 'The talkativeness of women has been gauged in comparison not with men but with silence.....then any talk in which woman engages can be too much' (Spender 1980:42). Some studies find that in the domestic sphere, where women are often seen as being in charge, they are more talkative and this has become a peculiar feature of them. Maybe that is also because they perform work that cannot be hampered by conversation. Men in most cases do work that requires energy, and concentration. Speaking in this case would undermine their progress, so they are more reticent to work.

In formal and public contexts the assumption is that men outrank women. The basic trend is for higher-status speakers to talk more than lower-status ones. In most contexts where status is relevant, men are more likely than women to occupy high-status positions. As the result, they speak more.

However, it is not only social division of labor that makes women more verbose. There are also influences of temperament and their psychology that reflect the separation into gender (Shkurtaj 1999). Women because of their nature are more expressive in communicating their feelings and intense experiences, so they cry, sigh and curse more than men. So when we hear curses such as: *Të futsha në dhe! Të hëngërt mortja! T'u shoftë dera! Mos të pastë jot'amë!* we cannot but automatically attribute them to the speech of women. This does not exclude the fact that there are also men who speak a lot and curse. Depending on the respective provinces and mentalities men curse as well, but this does not mean that cursing has become a distinct feature of their speech.

Setting variables such as the gender of participants, topics being discussed, status and age variations all contribute to the differences observed in the speech of men and women. While different studies (considering different variables) provide different results regarding women's verbosity, it seems that at least they agree on the fact that women's language is more affiliative, men's more assertive.

5. Conclusion

Men and women behave differently in social situations and take different roles, due to the expectations that society puts upon them (including gender stereotyping). Language as a social phenomenon inevitably reflects this. Studies on gender and language have shown differences in women's and men's that are brought about

by their different position in the social structure, encountering differential opportunities and constraints. As a result, women's language is described as hesitant, refined, euphemistic but also affiliative and compassionate.

It is true that gender differences in power are perceived to be eroding. As women gain more access to positions typically associated with power, their social role seems to be changing. However, this does not necessarily imply that women have overcome all barriers that impede their communication. Positive changes are to be expected so that men are not exclusively directing the communication rules.

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