Analysis of Gender in Interaction

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What Is Gender in Human Interaction?

Our conventional idea of gender can be seen from three major perspectives: biological, social, and cultural. That is, we are born with a set of genes that determine our biological sex—either male or female in most of the clear-cut cases. A male brain is larger than that of a female but that does not make much difference to its overall capacity. Men are also said to be more visual and spatially oriented while women are more audio and emotionally oriented. According to a recent study based on a large corpus of English, the researchers Newman, Groom, Handelman, and Peenebaker (2008, p. 211) found that "Women used more words related to psychological and social processes. Men referred more to object properties and impersonal topics." It can be said also that society sets gendered expectations or gendered roles for boys and girls, men and women, and husbands and wives, roles that we internalize and with which we socialize as we go through schooling, working, and living in a certain society. We learn that, in most societies, women are thought to be cooperative and family-oriented while men seem more aggressive, competitive, and career-oriented. Gender also plays a role culturally as different cultures and the weight of different histories can influence how certain gender traits, especially notions of masculinity and femininity, will interact in our lives.

Seeing gender or gendered behaviors and expectations as embedded in contexts, histories, and cultures helps us remain aware of the dynamics and indeterminacy of this topic. The conventional idea of seeing gender as a fixed and dichotomized category prescribed by a set of patriarchal values might still have strong meaning for some people, allowing their manipulation to advance a political agenda in some contested contexts, but it has been challenged by scholars in fields of applied linguistics and discourse analysis. That is, as individuals we do retain some agency in enacting and negotiating gendered roles and expectations in our mundane interactions with others. Not all of the interactions have a gendered dimension, of course; nor do our actions and intentions necessarily bring us the expected results. Linguists and scholars involved in discourse analyses are interested in how language can interact with these gendered performances, though other variables—such as the clothing we wear and nonverbal behavior—can also facilitate or debase such interaction. Such gendered "acts of identity" are more or less like other social identities subject to a variety of variables such as age, ethnicity, ideology, social status, and so forth.

A particular society might change its ideals about gendered roles, such as being a good mother and father or a filial son and daughter, as it evolves from a traditional society to a modern one. In fact we have seen this in most of the more developed countries, where birth rates have decreased as people no longer see traditional familial rituals such as marriage and giving birth as necessary rites of passage. Nor do individuals in these countries necessarily turn to traditional family and family members as their main or only sources of emotional and financial backup and support in times of trouble. With old familial values being replaced by more global and modern enthusiasms such as consumerism and individualism, customs associated with gendered expectations are also changing.

Different cultures also modify their ideals of a gendered trait—masculinity and femininity to start with—through time. These ideals are not always in harmony with each other, nor do they stay in fixed contrast to each other. One example of how a culture can change its ideas or ideals for developing men as men and women as women comes from Chinese culture as observed by Brownell and Wasserstrom (2002, p. 34). According to the authors,

> Scholarship on Chinese gender seems to indicate that, before the period of extended contact with the West, (1) gender concepts were anchored in beliefs about family structure and social roles more so than in beliefs about biological sex (and even beliefs that we might call "biological" were based on classical Chinese medicine, not Western science); (2) "men" and "women" were plural categories rather than unified categories opposed to each other; (3) "manhood" and "womanhood" were not directly linked to heterosexuality, and reproducing the lineage was a more important aspect of sexuality than individual pleasure.

Did contact with the West bring changes? Are any of the gendered traits more susceptible to change while others are more resistant? Did other forces such as modernization or nationalism reinforce or relativize Chinese ways of thinking and enacting gendered relations? Again, the authors conclude that

> Chinese gender maintained its own distinctive character—in particular, sexuality did not occupy the central role that it does in Western gender. Sexuality seems to have regained importance in the 1990s, but concepts of femininity and masculinity still seem to be primarily anchored in the roles of mother/father and wife/husband. The main change since the Qing is that femininity and masculinity are less anchored in the roles of daughter/son. (2002, p. 34)

In this entry, we will examine how language can play a role in various gendered interactions by referring to lived experiences from various cultures and societies (as opposed to representations or artifacts). We take our data and analyses mainly from the field of variational sociolinguistics, discourse analyses, and cultural studies. All of these disciplines stress the importance of interdisciplinary studies on how language can be used and analyzed to understand gendered interactions in a specific context. This does not mean that a specific linguistic item—a phonological variable, a lexical choice, or syntactic feature—has determining effects for how gender can be enacted in a specific interaction. Instead, precisely because gender is embedded in a complex web of communicative interaction, a specific use of language rarely yields clear-cut pragmatic or strategic effects. Polysemy and indeterminacy must be dealt with, and they thrive not only in how an individual can or will interpret an interaction but also in how they tie in with other social variables such as power or ethnicity, which are seen differently in various cultures.

The Polysemy of Gendered Language

Much scholarly time has been spent arguing that discussions of gender should be located within particular communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell, 1992). That is, by studying gender in interaction and studying the local meanings attached to interactions, within and among communities, a more flexible understanding of gender can be developed—an understanding that allows for variability of meaning and dimensions. Researchers on language do not always agree on whether gender is the only determining factor for how and why men and women speak differently; some argue that power and domination might be better descriptors for difference. That is, women adopt a more subversive way of

speaking to reflect their subordinate position (mostly true socioeconomically) in a society. Other researchers suggest that the same gendered language can be adopted by either sex for strategic and political purposes. For instance, Lakoff (1990) observes that numerous traits have been said to characterize women's forms of speech in American culture, but not all women use them, and probably no one uses them all the time. (They are, for instance, more likely to show up in informal social settings rather than in business situations.) Men sometimes use "women's forms of speech" either with different meanings or for individual special reasons. In the following section, we will list observations by Lakoff as background to compare with other instances where a similar language use adopted in a different social context yields different meanings. The section will end with examples of men using similar gendered language for strategic and commercial purposes.

First, Lakoff provides the following characteristics (1990, p. 204):

1. Women often seem to hit phonetic points less precisely than men: lisped *s's*, obscured vowels.
2. Women's intonational contours display more variety than men's.
3. Women use diminutives and euphemisms more than men ("You nickname God's creatures," says Hamlet to Ophelia).
4. More than men, women make use of expressive forms (adjectives, not nouns or verbs, and in that category those expressing emotional rather than intellectual evaluation): *lovely*, *divine*.
5. Women use forms that convey impreciseness: *so*, *such*.
6. Women use hedges of all kinds more than men.
7. Women use intonation patterns that resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval.
8. Women's voices are breathier than men's.
9. Women are more indirect and polite than men.
10. Women will not commit themselves to an opinion.
11. In conversation, women are more likely to be interrupted, less likely to introduce successful topics.
12. Women's communicative style tends to be collaborative rather than competitive.
13. More of women's communication is expressed nonverbally (by gesture and intonation) than men's.
14. Women are more careful to be "correct" when they speak, using better grammar and fewer colloquialisms than men.

The interactional aspect of "gendered" talk can be found in the ideas of Eckert and McConnell (2003) about positioning, and in those of Tannen (1990) on report versus rapport (i.e., women tend to use conversation to establish intimacy and relationships, while men use it to provide information and to seek independence and status). In addition to social practices, positioning, and styles, researchers such as Gal (1991) have suggested that we should not be accounting for these linguistic differences from a one-dimensional gender factor. She uses silence as an example to encompass the complexity of how the meanings of "powerless" can be changed when silence is used in a different context at different times. For example,

> The silence of women in public life in the West is generally deplored by feminists. It is taken to be a result and symbol of passivity and powerlessness; those who are denied speech, it is said, cannot influence the course of their lives or of history. In a telling contrast, however, we also have ethnographic reports of the paradoxical power of silence, especially in certain institutional settings. In episodes as varied as religious confession,

exercises in modern psychotherapy, bureaucratic interviews, oral exams, and police interrogations, the relations of coercion are reversed: where self-exposure is required, it is the silent listener who judges and thereby exerts power over the one who speaks (Foucault 1979). Silence in American households is often a weapon of masculine power (Sattel 1983). But silence can also be a strategic defense against the powerful, as when Western Apache men use it to baffle, disconcert, and exclude white outsiders (Basso 1979). And this does not exhaust the meanings of silence. For the English Quakers of the seventeenth century, both women and men, the refusal to speak when others expected them to marked an ideological commitment (Bauman 1983). It was the opposite of passivity, indeed a form of political protest. (Gal, 1991, p. 175)

The interactional aspect of "gendered" talk as exemplified by the above example helps us see that the use of "silence" is not a direct index of femininity, but rather represents a kind of stance (subject position) that is taken up by (or imposed on) a variety of less powerful people in society, including, but not limited to, women (see Jaffe, 2009, p. 13). The stress on agency, context, and ideology is very important in understanding how gender is embedded in language variation and social practice. Another intergender and intragender language use is provided by Bucholtz (2009), who analyzes a single slang term popular among many Mexicans and Mexican Americans—*guey* ([gwej], often lenited to [wej])—and argues that, though the term frequently translates as "dude," the semantic multivalence of *guey* allows it to operate (often simultaneously) as a marker both of interactional alignment and of a particular gendered style among Mexican American youth (p. 146). That is, her subjects do not use *guey* because they are male, nor do they use *guey* in order to directly construct a masculine identity. Rather, they are using this term along with other available semiotic resources, such as prosody, gesture, posture, clothing, topics of discourse, and telephones and cameras to establish both status and solidarity in relation to their social group and to index a cool, nonchalant stance all the while (see Bucholtz, 2009, p. 164).

Other scholars, such as Hall and Bucholtz (1995, pp. 183–4), link gendered language to different factors such as the speaker's agency, age, educational background, and ethnicity, and—to the perennial fascination of college students—have even interpreted meanings of gendered language through the prism of the phone sex industry in San Francisco. Hall argues that:

> This high-tech mode of linguistic exchange complicates traditional notions of power in language, because the women working within the industry consciously produce a language stereotypically associated with women's powerlessness in order to gain economic power and social flexibility.

She further argues that:

> The very existence of the term *sweet talk*—an activity that, in the American heterosexual mainstream, has become associated more with the speech patterns of women than those of men—underscores the ideological connection between women's language and sexual language.

In response to economic incentives and requests to reinforce stereotypical gendered images, phone sex workers (both men and women) are exploiting gendered language for their own economic survival. They come from all walks of life, different ethnicities and age groups, and are trying to make a living (and make fun) of the gendered language. They do not naively or passively speak in a language reflecting their subordinate status. Instead, they actively seek out ways to profit from their clientele's lack of imagination by exploiting gendered language.

Indirectness is another common example which should alert us to indeterminacy when we see language used in such a way as to enact gender relations in different contexts. For example, Tannen (1994) finds that both Greek men and Greek women are likely to interpret a question as an indirect request whereas American women are more likely than American men to make such an interpretation. Keenan (1974) finds that, in a Malagasy-speaking village on the island of Madagascar, men use more indirect language while women are more direct, but this does not mean that women have the dominant role in that society. These examples inform us again of the importance of seeing gender in interaction with a specific community practice. Indirectness, then, according to Tannen (1994, p. 34), can be used either by the powerful or by the powerless; the interpretation of a given utterance, and the likely response to it, depends on the setting, on an individual's status, and on the relationship of individuals to each other, as well as on the linguistic conventions that are ritualized in the cultural context.

We will end this section with an example of men adopting women's language for strategic purposes. As Holmes (1992, p. 317) observes, researchers recorded the speech of witnesses in a law court and found that male witnesses used more women's language features than women witnesses with more expertise in court or a higher occupational status. The following example illustrates this.

> Lawyer: And you saw, you observed what?
> Witness C: Well, after I heard—I can't really, I can't definitely state whether the brakes or the lights came first, but I rotated my head slightly to the right, and looked directly behind Mr. Z, and I saw reflections of lights, and uh, very very instantaneously after that I heard a very, very loud explosion—from my standpoint of view it would have been an implosion because everything was forced outward like this, like a grenade thrown into the room. And uh, it was, it was terrifically loud.

In this exchange, the male witness used "women's" language—hedges and boosters—in his account of what happened. Sex (i.e., being a man or a woman) was not a determining factor for this kind of gendered language use. Instead, it was used to enact the "powerless" role of the witness (who is not a woman in this case) in his interaction with the lawyer or in his recounting of what had happened, and may even have other pragmatic effects, such as avoiding accountability or responsibilities and thus expecting leniency or acquittal.

To conclude, gender is a complex social concept embedded in our biological wiring and socialization, as well as in mudane and professional interactions with others. Language can either reflect and reinforce a conventional gendered relationship or subvert stereo-typical gendered images, as we see in the sweet talk performed by both men and women in high-tech phone sex industries in San Francisco, or in men's adoption of women's language for courtroom interactions for strategic purposes.

SEE ALSO: Analysis of Identity in Interaction; Conversation Analysis and Gender and Sexuality; Culture

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