

Language and Sex, Change in Language Style

Language and Sex

A major issue in the sociolinguistics of speech is the relationship between sex and language. Since the mid-1970s research on language and sex has concentrated on the role language plays in the location and maintenance of women in a disadvantageous position in society. Before this, linguists had taken an interest in sex and language in two other respects. The earlier of these was the presence in a few languages of lexical, phonological, morphological forms that are used only or predominantly by speakers of one sex or the other. More recently, in earlier research in sociolinguistics, sex was investigated as an independent variable related to linguistic variables, along with social status, style, age and ethnicity. At the time most of the studies were done, linguists were most interested in sex-related linguistic features as purely linguistic phenomenon, and secondarily as a possible cause and effect of the relation between men and women in a social and political sense was not to develop until sixties.

Do women and men speak differently? English speakers are often aware that the answer to this question is almost “yes” for all speech communities. The linguistic forms used by women and men contrast – to different degrees – in all speech communities. There are other ways too in when the linguistic behaviour of women and men differ. It is claimed women are more linguistically polite than men, for instance, and that women and men emphasize different speech functions.

Sex differences in language are often just one aspect of more pervasive linguistic differences in the society reflecting social status or power differences. If a community is very hierarchical, for instance, and within each level of the hierarchy men are more powerful than women, then linguistic differences between the speech of women and men just one dimension of more extensive differences reflecting the social hierarchy as a whole.

I can give you one particular example of an experience I had during my several journeys to the Indian subcontinent:

In Bengali society, for instance, a younger person should not address a superior by first name. Similarly wife, being subordinate to her husband, is not permitted to use her husband’s name. She addresses him with a term such

as s u n c h o ‘do you hear?’ When she refers to him she uses a circumlocution. One nice example of this practice is provided by the Bengali wife whose husband’s name was t a r a , which also

means ‘star’. Since she could not call him t a r a, his wife used the term n o k k h o t r o or ‘heavenly body’ to refer to him. This point – the inter-relationship of sex with other factors – is illustrated even more clearly later. The fact that there are clearly identifiable differences between women’s and men’s speech in the communities discussed here reflects the clearly demarcated sex roles in these communities. Sex-exclusive speech forms (i.e. some forms are used only by women and others are used only by men) reflect sex-exclusive social roles. The responsibilities of woman and men are different in such communities, and everyone knows that, and knows what they are. There are no arguments over who prepares the dinner and who puts children to bed. Not surprisingly in western communities where women’s and men’s social roles overlap, the speech forms they use also overlap. In other words women and men do not use completely different forms. They use different quantities or frequencies of the same forms. Across all social groups women use more standard forms than men and so, correspondingly, men use more vernacular forms than women. In Detroit, for instance, multiple negation (e.g. I don’t know nothing about it), a vernacular feature of speech, is more frequent in men’s speech than in women’s. This is true in every social group but the difference is most dramatic in the second highest social group (the lower middle class) where the men’s multiple negation score is 32 per cent compared to only 1 per cent for women.

This pattern is a typical one for many grammatical features. In many speech communities, when women use more of a linguistic form than men, it is generally the standard form – the overtly prestigious form – that women favour. When men use a form more often than women, it is usually a vernacular form, one which is not admired overtly by the society as a whole, and which is not cited as the ‘correct’ form. What is the explanation for it? Why does female and male speech differ in this way?

Language and style

Stylistics, study of the devices in languages (such as rhetorical figures and syntactical patterns) that are considered to produce expressive or literary style.

Academic language should be clear, unambiguous and objective. “Objective” does not mean that you avoid taking a position; rather, it means to expose its foundations (reasons, evidence). Inexperienced writers are often tempted to embellish their language, using complicated expressions and technical terminology. As a rule of thumb, however, you should choose ordinary language as long as it is adequate. Scholars who have achieved classical status often write in a plain and direct style. This is precisely why – regardless of changing literary conventions – they have been widely read over the years.

Many academic studies are, by necessity, demanding to read. This is partly due to their high level of specialisation and partly due to formal requirements such as detailed descriptions of methodology and findings, numerous references etc. This means that the authors have to put down a good deal of work in order to produce a readable text.

Level of style

Who is your audience? What can you assume that your reader already knows, and how many definitions are needed? For example, are you writing for your supervisor or for a general reader? The general advice is to aim somewhere in between, and to write as you would do for a fellow student.

ACTIVE – PASSIVE

Many students and researchers use the passive voice of verbs in their texts. Sometimes this is necessary, but too much passive voice makes for a heavy-going text. Moreover, passive constructions often give rise to other problems. For example, you are likely to end up with long sequences of words strung together by prepositions. For example, “... *investigation of questions concerning a reduction in the occurrence of ...*”

Example of a passive construction: New results in this area are continuously produced by the research group.

The same sentence using the active voice: The research group continuously produces new results in this area.

Use of the passive voice tends to conceal who is doing the action. In a methods section, this is often the norm since the results should be reproducible by anyone. However, there is a common misunderstanding that sentences using the passive voice are more “objective”, because the author avoids saying “I” or “we”. It is sensible to vary your writing style as appropriate. Overuse of the passive voice makes your text heavy to read, and gives a woolly, bureaucratic and “mystifying” sound . Do not feel that you have to avoid it altogether, however, as overuse of the active voice also becomes tiring for your reader. We do not always need to be reminded of the person of the researcher through the use of “I” and “we”.