

Cross-Gender Differences on Netspeak

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Abstract

As everyone knows, language are invented by human beings and used by human beings. It is proved that human is the main part of language in the language creation and the language using history. Human being can be divided into two parts, male and female, and it is inevitable that language has the gender characteristic. Nowadays, information technology developed rapidly, because of its economical, efficient, user-friendly and convenient hallmarks, the Internet has irresistibly entered into almost every corner of people's life. The result in linguistics is that a new language variety—netspeak, which was designed to meet the requirement of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) was created. Recent years, linguists and sociolinguists have paid increasing number of attention to netspeak. A large number of studies have been conducted on netspeak, but gender differences in netspeak have been hardly get concern because of the anonymity of CMC. In this article, I want to verify whether the previous studies findings on gender differences in face-to-face communication can be applied to describe and to explain the gender-related differences in netspeak or not, and I hope this article can be beneficial to the understanding of language and gender in CMC context.

Key words: Language; Gender difference; Netspeak; Male and female netizen; CMC

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INTRODUCTION

The word “language” is offered several most frequently used senses by Webster’s New World Dictionary, we here only focus on its fundamental sense. Language is a mean of verbal communication. Language is a purposeful act and is instrumental in communicating by speaking or writing. Language is a social mark and communication can only take place effectively if all the users share a broad understanding of human interaction including such associated factors as nonverbal cues, motivation, and socio-cultural roles. In brief, because language is far more sophisticated than any animal communication system, we are different from animals.

We must understand that there is a obvious difference between gender and sex. If we want to represent the relationship among them, we must define these terms clearly.

The term gender referred to grammatical categories, for example, grammatical inflection of nouns. John Money proposed to use gender to differ from sex. People traditionally use the term sex to mark the differences between men and women. In other words, the distinctions refer to physiological, biological and genetic characteristics, such as, chromosome, reproductive organs and functions etc. To contrast with sex, gender is broader and more inclusive in social context and it is set by convention and other social, political, economic and cultural forces. So, we can say, gender is the social dimension of being male or female and gender is not inherent but constituted with many social factors. The distinctions between males and females are the different social constructions from the perspective of gender, and social constructions here refer to roles, behaviors, attitudes, values, expectations, representations, personality traits, beliefs, etc..

In short, the biological term sex, which refers to biological, physiological and genetic characteristics between men and women; gender includes one’s status as

men or women, it also as a matter of social assignment and personal recognition. Gender is related to the social and cultural sense. Therefore, sociolinguists think that variable between men and women is not sex but gender.

There are many differences between men and women in biology and many aspects in life. Men and women must behave in an appropriate way and be treated in different ways as well. Usually, men are considered as independent, rational, active and confident; by contrast, women are often considered as a sort of people who are dependent, sensitive, passive and frail. For a long time, differential sexuality is considered to be the main cause of distinctive features between men and women. Therefore, language has greatly influenced by the stereotype idea of men and women.

The inter-relationships between language and society were investigated by sociolinguistics. As the interaction of social and language factors, "It is important not to overlook this social aspect of language because, in many ways, speech is a form of social identity and is used, consciously or unconsciously, to indicate membership of different social groups or different speech communities" (Gorge, 2000, p.211). From the perspective of sociolinguistic, comparing with the biological sex, the term gender is used to account for categories of people. People think that gender is a crucial factor in humans' behaviors, which include their different speech acts.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF NETSPEAK

1.1 Definition of Netspeak

David Crystal first created the term netspeak in his book *Language and the Internet*. From his idea, netspeak is similar to computer-mediated communication (abbreviated as CMC). Generally speaking, it is described as any communicative service that runs by using two or more networked computers. However, it is acceptable to focus more on the medium. As a name, because of the suffix of "speak", netspeak is broader than CMC, which includes listening, talking, writing, and reading. In his book, there's no settled definition of netspeak. On one hand, David Crystal defines it as a unique type of Internet language displaying feature, faced with all the above situations, leading to its feature as a medium—electronic, global and interactive. Here, "the above situations" means email, chat groups, virtual world and World Wide Web, and moreover, in the second edition of his book, Crystal adds instant messaging and blogging into this category. On the other hand, he also indicates that "netspeak is better seen as written language." At this point, it is not difficult to infer that netspeak is a novel medium that combined spoken, written and electronic properties in it.

1.2 The Feature of Netspeak

From Wilbur' argument, Internet culture still based on text, however it may change. From this perspective,

netspeak directly represents Internet culture, thus, its characteristics includes both sides of speech and writing. However, As a language variety, netspeak also has many distinctive features. Generally speaking, each language variety has five distinctions according to Crystal and Davy's research, which are graphic features, graphological features, grammatical features, lexical features and discourse features. Furthermore, Crystal emphasizes that we should also pay attention to phonetic features and phonological features of netspeak.

The most general feature of netspeak among those features is mainly manifested by graphology and lexicon. The distinctiveness of graphological and lexical features is as follows: graphological features: spelling errors are acceptable, usage of punctuation is not conventional, emoticons are used frequently, and capitalization is seldom used and so on; lexical features: making compound words by combining two or more words, creating words by adding prefixes or suffixes, generating new expressions by blending from different words or phrases, outputting different words by using unusual spelling, and using abundant abbreviations and acronyms.

Though the other features are not very notorious, there're still some findings, examples are as follows:

Grammatical features: verbs are frequently reduplicated, simple sentences or incomplete sentences are wildly used, and grammatical rules are violated frequently.

Phonological features: use more onomatopoeia, homophones and sound repetition.

2. DIFFERENT GENDERS STYLES OF NETSPEAK

2.1 Introduction of Different Genders of Netspeak

On the basis of the distinctive features of netspeak, more and more attentions focus on the linguistic form itself. With regard to Tannen's professes, we should take the conversational features, especially gendered features in netspeak into consideration too. Tannen insists that men's talking are filled with status, independence, information, advice, orders and conflict. On contrary, women's conversations are full of support, feelings, understanding, intimacy, proposals and compromise.

First and for most, it was shown that the number of speech in online interaction between men and women almost is the same. Netizens need to comply with the special Internet communicative. In order to communicate efficiently, both genders tend to use short and incomplete sentences. Furthermore, whatever one's gender is, people involved in online practice equally. Therefore, there's rare difference between men and women in the amount of speech.

Secondly, it turned out that females prefer to use more back-channel responses online. In order to assist

successful conversations, females use more back-channel responses to encourage male to continue the dialogue. It can find its supports in Fishman's claim that females are often inclined to give support and response. Despite, males use back-channel responses to show their agreement or they are listening to the counterparts. That is also consistent with Maltz and Borker's argument.

Last but not least, males' online speech involved more creative use of Chinese. Concerned with this fact, it is essential to make an assumption, which is, males are apt to be more creative in the usage of language and they are inclined to choose such a manner in using and producing their language on the Internet.

2.2 Analysis of Different Genders

Compared with males, females are more likely to use final particles while communicating on the Internet. It is because final particles can make their tones of speech soft that females are apt to use them frequently to keep their politeness. There exists another reason which is final particles are usually related to the communicative style of humor which is in association with female speech. In order to avoid being regarded as womanish, males almost never use them, both in real and virtual world.

Generally speaking, both males and females are rarely influenced by the social pressure and cultural stereotypes. Let me put it another way, when it comes to the way of using many more intensifiers, there's no need for females to act like a lady, yet, males are not required to produce less intensifiers for being argumentative or aggressive.

There are not many differences between male and female in the frequency of emoticon usage. Emoticons are used for expressing emotions as well as emphasizing the tone or meaning for the reason of the restriction of online communication based on text. On the basis of data analysis, males and females both share the same freedom in using emoticons in online interaction.

All in all, males and females comply with some certain social conventions in using netspeak though they are in the same online community of practice. Through the completely agree of the Internet, netspeak has gradually evolved into a new medium of communication. Its difference compared with traditional conversational lies in basic aspects from speech and writing, and thus can be regarded as a new style of language varieties. Now it's time to make a concrete and detailed analysis on gender differences of netspeak.

2.2.1 Turn Talking

Every common conversation is typically characterized by turn-taking: one talks and stops; then another one joins in, talks and stops. Here "turn" means a shift from one speaker to another in the direction of the talking, which is the normal phenomenon and evolvement in a conversation. Being a perfect conversation, turn-taking supposed to act like this: one participant speaking while another listening, making several comments on what

she or he has just heard, and giving a response, that is to say, conversely, listening and responding by the first participant between the two speakers.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson put forward a general conversation which is in association with the system of turn-taking. Sachs et al. put that "one party at a time" is the priority order of conversational interaction from the speakers' point of view. No matter a talking is changed by a speaker or a natural shift or turn, it can only significantly occur at Transition Relevance Place (TRPs). A TRP appears when one person stops talking and another starts talking or when the original speaker makes a great ending of the conversation he or she is in. Turn-taking sticks to a set of ground rules.

However, in a real conversation things are different. Women are more likely to comply with this rule more strictly, while men tend to interrupt frequently. It is indicated in some researches that in mixed-gender conversations, men are more aggressive on women's right to speak, especially their right to turn a talk.

2.2.2 Interruption

We define Interruption as an attempt by one speaker to disrupt another's utterance and a violation of speakers' turn when they talk so as to get the opportunity for a competing turn. Because it happens when one speaker attempts to talk while another is speaking. It is a kind of conversation with violation by the turn-taking rules. An interruption involves a "deeper intrusion into the internal structure of a speaker's utterance" (Thorne & Henley, 1983, p.104). The interrupter gain their own turn to speak by stopping the speaker from finishing his or her turn at the same time. Therefore, we can see that interruptions cause breakout of symmetry of the conversational model.

Many researchers have used West and Zimmerman's early work as reference. There are also a lot of researches drawing different conclusions in which they found that men interrupt less than women or no gender difference from that of West and Zimmerman. The problem is that the difference between interruption and overlap. Women are prone to use overlaps because of their cooperativeness. Overlaps do not to dominate the speaking person or control the conversation, which are not the same as interruption. Besides Overlap is a fairly neutral word is because that two or more speakers can talk the same topic at the same time with overlaps while they can't feel their speaking rights being violated apparently. Overlaps are events which occur at the near possible turn-transition places. In addition some longer intrusions (e.g., saying the same thing at the same time) or brief utterances (e.g., yeah, right) have a bit helpful warrant. Compared with interruption which will stop people from talking, people will not be stopped when they overlap their conversation. In some situations, the overlapped conversation repeats the contents of other people's saying, or predicts how the person will end their talk.

Comparing women's overlap with men's interruption, we can indicate that the speech style of men is competitive while women's is cooperative. Women think highly of cooperativeness in their conversations, while men are not likely to feel comfortable with overlapping talk of the degree of intimacy.

2.2.3 Minimal Response

Because of different purposes, man and woman used it in different ways. Minimal responses from a man always work as a turn and occur after women's turns, which in fact discourage the current speaker for there being no any elaboration. It indicates that the previous speaker builds no informational comment, and the listener shows no interest for the topic. Besides, men also use it as a technique to avoid being involved in topics developed by the women.

On the contrary, women, always being listeners, tended to hold this kind responses in the current speaker's turns, and even express ongoing interest to the development. For the most time, they will encourage the current speaker to go on his topic. Minimal responses are often used as back-channels within the men's turns, which is the indicator of attention and support during brief pauses.

The usage of minimal responses differs considerably between men and women. In mixed-sex conversation, male speakers often say *hmm* or *yeah* at an appropriate point when only after a pause to put off their minimal responses. The minimal response put off may function to signal that the listener's lack of attention and interest in the topic being said. In other words, it may discourage the interaction. So this kind usage of minimal responses always used by men to resist contributing to topics developed by women.

2.2.4 Topic and Topic Control

In a discussion or a talk, the topic works as the subject and main content. In general, topics are different chosen by men and women in daily life.

In same-gender conversations, topics are always different between men and women. Men always focus on independence, status, and exclusion, so they tend to use the informational functioning of language more. On the other hand, women concern more intimacy, connection, and inclusion. So they favor language function as a way of communicating relationships. Their interests in different topics make differences and come to the different kinds of conversation. For men, they tend to talk impersonal topics, such as sports, business, economics and politics. While for women, they favor more about cosmetics, clothing, family, emotions and relationship. Though there being different topics and interest, in mixed-sex conversation, speakers have no disagreement. The participants are more likely to compromise the others. Men will speak in less aggressive and competitive way; women also try to reduce their amount of talk about personal topics.

The right to choose and control topics in a conversation is normally shared equally between the participant

speakers. To dominant a conversation, one needs to focus on the result of research of Leet-Pellegrini which treated the interaction of the independent and separated variables as follows: speaker's gender and Professional knowledge. Leet-Pellegrini confirmed the fact that well-informed and knowledgeable male speakers were more likely to get the right to control a conversation. On contrary, uninformed female speakers were not very active in talking, and they tended to give less reaction and other language support or other sustaining linguistic actions.

2.2.5 Amount of Talk

In an ongoing conversation or interaction, amount of talk can be regarded as an important conversational feature. For women's talk, there are many myths and stereotypes, some longstanding and well-established, and some more recent. People always hold such a view that women talk too much and they won't let you get a word when they are talking.

A lot of researchers have investigated the question of gender differences in many talks on language and gender studies. While, studies have proved that men talk more. It is shown that men talk more than women in situations as diverse as staff meetings (Eakins & Eakings, 1978, p.28), television panel discussions, experimental pairs, E-mail discussions via computer, and husband-and-wife pairs in spontaneous conversation. The studies vary a great deal depend on how amount of talk is measured. It has been measured by the amount of speech in a sentence, length of response, average total number of words produced, time periods of speech, the average percentage of time spent in a conversation, mean number of words per pause, etc (Thorne, Kramarae & Henley, 1983, p.108).

The author will use the average total number of words produced by each participant in a conversation which has been used in the previous studies. The average total number of words contributed by male speaker and female speaker in each conversation will be calculated. But, articulate noises are precluded and not considered as one word, such as "uh-huh" or "mm-huh" which are defined as minimal response or back-channeling indicating listenership in conversational analysis. Liaisons and contractions are considered as one word, for instance, *I'm*, *she's*, *don't*, *isn't*, *haven't*, *gonna*. The modal words such as *oh*, *hi*, *uh*, *well*, *huh* are also excluded.

CONCLUSION

Language, a part of culture, is a medium that one recognizes the society. For now, the whole human society undergoes a change, which is caused by the Internet. With the extensive popularity of the Internet, it is not surprising that Internet culture has been emerged, and furthermore, this kind of cultural reality affects how people speak and behave gradually. The direct manifestation of Internet culture is netspeak. As a language variant, it is also

affected by social features. At present, the influence of Internet language mainly plays a role in young people crowd, but I believe its influence on language is very important in the future. With permission of time and recourses, all the limitations can be improved or even resolved in future studies.

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