The Gender Linked Differences in the Use of Linguistic Strategies in Face-to-face Communication

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Abstract
Research on language and gender interaction is well into its third decade and the related review of literature has shown that males and females tend to differ in face-to-face speech and in written language (e.g., Lackoff 1990, Mulac 1989, Tannen 1990). Yet there have been surprisingly few contributions from the Persian language to the exploration of cross-linguistic literature on the topic. This study is an attempt to provide a report on face-to face communications in Persian language. To carry out the study male-male, male-female, and female-female communications were examined in terms of linguistic strategies (e.g., interruption, intensifiers, amount of speech, topic raising) used by participants. The data of the study were collected through observations. The data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of the study indicate that there is a significant difference between males and females in the use of linguistic strategies in male-male and female-female communications. The results also indicate that

there is an interaction between gender and experience, education and power of the interlocutors in the use of linguistics strategies.

Key words: gender differences, face-to-face communication, linguistic strategies, Persian

Introduction

According to Tannen (1995:138), "communication isn't as simple as saying what you mean. How you say what you mean is crucial, and differs from one person to the next, because using a language is a learned behavior: how we talk and listen are deeply influenced by cultural expectations". One of the important topics, therefore, that has engaged the minds of many sociolinguists in recent years is the connection between the structure and the use of languages and the social roles of the men and women who speak them. It seems, in general, that all known societies appear to use language as one of the means of marking out gender differences; therefore, numerous observers have described women's speech as being different from that of men (Baron 1986 in Wardhaugh 1993, Lakoff 1990, Mulac 1989, Tannen 1990). Lakoff (1973), for example, claims that color words like *beige, lavender* and adjectives like *adorable, charming* are commonly used by women but only very rarely by men. Women are also said to have their own vocabulary for emphasizing certain effects on them, words and expressions such as *so good, such, lovely, etc.* (Wardhaugh 1993). Carli (1990) has also suggested that different norms may have been established for men and women, affecting speech style perceptions. For instance, low-status persons, including women, characterized by a kind of powerless speech style, generally appeal to intensifiers (e.g., so, very), hedges (I think, kinda), hesitations (uh, well), etc. as linguistic devices to secure their social position (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr 1978). Moreover, intensifiers have been found to be a feature of female speech, whereas hedges are frequently used by men (Carli 1990). It is also claimed that females are more linguistically polite than males.

Tannen (1990) argues that men's discourse has assertive and competitive features, whereas women's is supportive and relational, leading to the distinction between male "report talk" and female "rapport talk". The same feature has been reported by Colley and Todo (2003), who examined email messages and found that e-mails from female

participants contained a higher incidence of features associated with the maintenance of rapport and intimacy than those from male participants. Rosseti (2005) has also found that males are more prone to write in an aggressive, competitive style, while women tend to be far more supportive in their writing (email messages). It seems that male/ female language style dichotomy has been transported into computer communication as well.

According to Milroy (1997), given the general orientation of current sociolinguistics, finding a convincing explanation for linguistic sex-marking is difficult. Mulac & Bradac (1995) argue that the relationship between gender, language and power is much more complex than can be understood at this time. Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1972), however, have both emphasized a greater orientation to community prestige norms as the main driving force in women's, as opposed to men's, linguistic behavior. Trudgill's findings in Norwich led him to see women as overwhelmingly conservative, as they showed that men lead in most changes. Furthermore, women in his study tended to over-report their use of prestige forms and men tended to underreport theirs. He therefore argued that women and men respond to opposed sets of norms: women to overt, standard language prestige norms and men to covert, vernacular prestige norms. Overt prestige attaches to refined qualities, as associated with the cosmopolitan marketplace and its standard language, whereas covert prestige attaches to masculine, 'rough and tough' qualities.

Trudgill (1972) has also speculated that women's overt prestige orientation was a result of their powerless position in society. He argued that in as much as society does not allow women to advance their power or status through action in the marketplace, they are thrown upon their symbolic resources, including their appearance and their language, to enhance their social position (Eckert, 1989). In the same line of research, Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr (1978) utilized the terms "powerful speech style" and "powerless speech style" and argued that speech style is linked to social power and status. Low-status persons generally use a powerless speech style laced with intensifiers ("so," "very"), hedges ("I think," "kinda"), hesitations ("uh," "well"), hypercorrect grammar, questioning forms (use of rising, question intonation in declarative form), polite forms, and gestures. High-status persons rarely use these powerless forms and therefore employ what Erickson et al. dubbed the powerful style.

Lesley Milroy (1997), however, believes that it is hard to take seriously the various

interpretations of linguistic sex-marking which are based upon the notion of power or prestige. According to her, women resort to language because of the absence of opportunities to mark their status by occupation.

Sachs (2005) on the other hand, argues that language differences between males and females are due to either heredity and environment or social experiences. It is said that males and females are born into the same world but they are socialized to live in different worlds. Tannen (1990, 1994, 1995), following this line of research, studied the impact of socialization on women and men and described stereotypical feminine and masculine communication patterns. Her framework of female/male communication indicates that females are generally socialized to feel a primary need for connection while males are generally socialized to feel a need for status. To meet their need for connection, females create intimacy with others, while males meet their need for status by establishing distance or independence from others.

Additionally, Tannen (1994) sheds doubt on linguistic strategies used by females/males and believes that linguistic strategies are relative and ambiguous with regard to dominance/subordination or distance/closeness. She emphasizes that linguistic strategies are used by different genders to convey different meanings. For example, silence is not always a sign of subordination; in some settings powerful speakers remain silent. Moreover, she suggests that linguistic strategies are cultural-specific, for instance, Americans of some cultural and geographic backgrounds, men and women alike, are more likely than others to use relatively direct than indirect styles, and, citing Keenan (1974), Tannen (1994) recites that in a Malagasy-speaking village on the island of Madagascar, women are seen as direct and men as indirect, unlike English speakers.

As is shown, although research on language and gender interaction is well into its third decade, there is still a great amount of controversy over the causes of and the factors having effects on gender differences in the application of various linguistic means and strategies. Surprisingly, only a few contributions have been made to the exploration of cross-linguistic literature on the topic from non-western cultures, Islamic countries in particular. In line with the aforementioned arguments, it may seem that males and females in Persian communities, which enjoy both Persian and Islamic cultural traditions, vary in terms of the use of linguistic strategies in their face-to-face communications.

Iranian women are also faced with another social limitation, namely some kind of traditional dress code which presumably puts them in a more inferior social status and deprives them of using their appearance to establish their social position. This study is thus an attempt to investigate gender-linked differences in the use of linguistic strategies in face-to-face communications in Persian speech community. We also incorporated the education level of the informants as a factor that may influence the use of linguistic strategies in mixed and non-mixed settings.

Method

A total of 20 face-to-face conversations, shown in table 1, were observed, recorded and transcribed. In each conversation there were two turn takers; 40 participants (20 males and 20 females) thus took part in the study.

Table 1. *Mixed and non-mixed conversations observed*

Conversation settings	Groups	Participants	Gender
Male-Male	4	8	
Female –Female	4	8	
Male-Female (same ed.)	4	8	4 M – 4F
Educated Male-less ed. Female	4	8	4 M – 4F
Less ed. Male- educated Female	4	8	4 M – 4F

Having observed different mixed/non-mixed groups, we tried to answer the following questions:

1) Is there a significant difference between males and females in the use of linguistic strategies in face-to-face communication?

2) Is there a significant difference between educated males and educated females in the use of linguistic strategies in face-to-face communication?

3) Is there a significant difference between educated males and less educated females in the use of linguistic strategies in face-to-face communication?

4) Is there a significant difference between less educated males and educated females in the use of linguistic strategies in face-to-face communication?

5)   Does 'males and females' education degree have any impact on the use of linguistic strategies in mixed settings?

The educational level of all participants in M/M and F/F settings was above high school diploma while half of the participants in mixed settings (F/M) had already graduated from high school and the other half were not able to finish high school. The age range of the participants was between 25 and 40; they were all bilingual, speaking Persian and another minority language. All the conversations were in Persian.

Data analysis

The data of the study were collected through observation and recording. To collect natural and authentic data, in some settings the researcher acted as either a turn taker (active participant) or an observer (non-active participant). Since the data of the study were collected when the participants were busy with their daily activities, all the data for the study are rather close to natural speech. In each conversation the speakers knew that their speech was recorded. They were also assured that the recorded speech would be kept confidential and would be used only for research purposes. After conducting the interviews/observations, the data were transcribed (16 minutes starting from the tenth minute of each interview). Then the frequencies of each linguistic strategy in non mixed settings, mixed settings where the subjects were the same in their education degree and mixed settings where interlocutors were not the same were counted. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. As data were mostly nominal, the X^2 was calculated to analyze and interpret the data (p=.05)**.**

First, after a general review of the transcriptions, we present the data for the study in each communication setting. Then the data are analyzed to see whether there is any significant difference between male and female participants in each conversational setting.

Table 2. M*ales' and females' use of linguistics strategies in mixed and non-mixed settings in general (extracted from 32 minutes of speech)*

	Intensifiers	Interruptions	Amount of Speech	Topic Raising
M-M	64	160	2425	51
F-F	103	198	2843	54

The general results of the study, shown in table 2, indicate that there is a significant difference between males' and females' use of intensifiers ($X^2 = 17$, p=.05), interruptions ($X^2 = 21$, p=.05), and amount of speech ($X^2 = 18$, p=.05). That is, in general females' use of linguistic strategies is greater than that of males'. In terms of the strategy of "topic raising", the results of the study indicate that there is no significant difference between males and females in the use of this strategy.

As is shown in table 3, there were significant differences between males' and females' use of intensifiers ($X^2 = 8$,p=.05), interruptions ($X^2 = 5.86$ p=.05), topic raisings ($X^2 = 11$ p=.05), and amount of speech ($X^2 = 5$ p=.05) in non-mixed settings. Females are again in the forefront of strategy use in all four contexts in non-mixed settings.

Table 3. *Males' and females' use of linguistics strategies in non-mixed settings (extracted from 16 min. of speech).*

	Intensifiers	Interruptions	Amount of S.	T. Raising
M-M	35	80	1300	12
F-F	50	110	1578	22

Now let us see what happens when males are speaking to females and females are addressing their male counterparts. The results of the study in table 4 indicate that females' use of intensifiers ($X^2 =11$) and amount of speech ($X^2 =80$) is significantly different from those of males'. Females used intensifiers much more than males and their amount of speech is greater than their male interlocutors. Our male informants however raised more topics in mixed conversation settings and they did not show significant

difference from the female informants in interrupting others.

Table 4. M*ales' and females' use of linguistic strategies in mixed settings (educated males and less educated females) (extracted from 16 min. of speech).*

	Intensifiers	**Interruption**	**Amount of Speech**	**Topic raising**
M in M/F	28	80	1125	39
F in M/F	53	80	1265	32

The effect of education on strategy use is examined next. The data, shown in table 5, reveal that in mixed settings where males and females are of the same level of education there is no significant difference between males and females, except for intensifiers and amount of speech. Males and females therefore interrupted each other approximately the same number of times and raised approximately the same number of topics in their face-to-face conversations. But females used more intensifiers than males (X^2=14) and their speech amount is significantly greater than that of males (X^2=90), although they have gained the same level of education as their male counterparts.

Table 5. *The use of linguistic strategies by males and females (same education) in mixed settings (extracted from 16 minutes of speech)*

	Topic raising	**Amount of speech**	**Interruptions**	**Intensifiers**
M in M/F	34	700	78	26
F in M/F	30	1040	54	64

The results of the study in table 6 indicate that educated males interrupt less educated females more (X^2 = 7.70, p=.05), and less educated males are more frequently interrupted by more educated females (X^2 = 5.57, p=.05). Education seems to have some influence here.

Table 6. *The use of linguistic strategies by males and females in conversational settings in which one speaker is educated and the other one is less educated. (Extracted from 16 minutes of speech.)*

	Intensifiers		Interruptions		Amount of speech		Topic raising	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Less ed. F/ Ed. M	28	26	**100**	64	**1800**	1200	**64**	28
Less ed. M/ Ed. F	32	32	64	**108**	1400	**1980**	32	**52**

Also according to this table, no matter what gender you are, you may speak more if you are more educated than your male or female counterpart. Also, in mixed settings in which males and females are not of the same level of education, they do not raise the same number of topics. In F/M settings educated females raised 52 topics but less educated males raised 32 topics ($X2 = 8$, $p=.05$). On the other hand, educated males raised 64 topics but less educated females raised 28 topics only ($X2= 14$, $p=.05$). It seems, therefore, that there is a significant relationship between the speakers' gender and their level of education. More educated ones raise more topics regardless of their gender and the more educated the speakers are the greater their amount of speech is.

As far as the use of intensifiers is concerned, the differences are not huge. Less educated females used slightly more intensifiers than educated males and there is no difference between less educated males and educated females in the use of intensifiers.

Discussion

Lakoff (1973) and Wardhaugh (1993) believe that because women have been denied access to power in the society, they use different linguistic strategies to express and secure their social status. Therefore, intensifiers are assumed to be used by women to indicate their different roles which they play in the society. The results of this study indicate that in non-mixed and mixed settings females' use of intensifiers is usually greater than that of males. Therefore, following Lakoff (1973) and Trudgill (1972) the

difference between males and females in the use of linguistic strategies can be attributed to the different roles which they have in societies.

Zimmerman (1983) cited in Tannen (1995) believes that men dominate women by interrupting them but Debora and Clarks (1993) do not indicate a clear pattern of males interrupting females. The results of our study indicate that in non-mixed conversation settings, females are more frequently interrupted by each other than males in M/M settings and in mixed conversation settings the more educated and experienced interlocutors interrupt the other speakers regardless of their gender. Therefore, education can be claimed as an influential factor, which can lead to equality between males and females, and this equality helps women to gain power and social status. In Iran, except for some cases in rural areas, men do not interrupt women to express their dominance and superiority over them in the society. Therefore, according to Tannen (1994) and Debora and Clarks (1993), interruptions are not necessarily and absolutely used to indicate the powerfulness or powerlessness of one specific gender in face-to-face conversations. This linguistic strategy is used by both males and females and the interaction between the speakers' education and their gender is significant.

Concerning the amount of speech, in the related literature there are two different assumptions. One is that powerful people do the talk and powerless people are usually silenced; the other according to Sattle (1983) cited in Tannen (1994), is that powerful people use silence to express power over powerless ones and men use silence rather than talking to express power over women. The results of this study indicate that education of the speakers is an important factor in determining the speakers' amount of speech. In Iranian speech communities, usually those who are more educated hold social positions and usually do the talk and the others are silent, whether the more educated ones are males or females. In mixed conversation settings in which males and females are of the same level of education, sometimes the males do the talk and females are silent and sometimes males are silent and women do the talk. What does this mean? Does this mean that greater amount of speech of speakers indicates their gender superiority over the other? Following Tannen's (1994) findings it can be said that both males and females use this linguistic strategy in face-to-face communication, but the education of the speakers determines the amount of speech.

Shuy (1982) cited in Tannen (1994) assumes that the speakers who raise the most topics are dominating a conversation. However, in this study the observed conversations among females and males in non-mixed settings demonstrated that in F/F settings more topics are raised than in M/M settings, whereas, in mixed settings the more educated interlocutors raise more topics than less educated counterparts regardless of their genders. In mixed settings in which men and women are of the same level of education, male and female interlocutors raise the same number of topics. That is, men or women do not raise topics to express their gender dominance and superiority over each other. Their education and social status indicate their domination in the conversation not their gender. As far as education is concerned, it can be discussed that in societies where males and females have the same opportunity to have higher education, females no longer appeal to the use of linguistic strategies to secure their social status. They can secure their social status through education. Therefore, in Iranian society neither males nor females use linguistic strategies to show their dominance and superiority in mixed-settings in which males and females are of the same level of education.

Conclusion and implications

This study was an attempt to study the gender differences in the use of linguistic strategies. To carry out the study males' and females' conversations in mixed and non-mixed settings were studied and analyzed. Based on the results of the study the following conclusions are drawn:

a)   there is a significant difference between males and females in the use of linguistic strategies in non-mixed settings,

b)   in non-mixed settings there is a significant difference between educated and less educated interlocutors,

c)   in mixed settings there is a significant interaction between gender of the turn takers and their education level. That is, the more educated interlocutors' use of linguistic strategies is different from that of less educated ones regardless of their gender, and

d)   in mixed settings, only in one linguistic strategy (amount of speech), there is no significant difference between males and females when they are of the same level of education. In other words, education is an influential variable in the use of linguistic

strategies in face- to face communications.

The results of the study are theoretically and practically significant. Theoretically speaking, sociolinguists will certainly know that despite the fact that males and females are significantly different in terms of the use of linguistic strategies, education could be very influential. Practically speaking, the results of the study could have implications in different ways especially in education. For instance, in English language classes, English language teachers should know that the difference between males and females in the use of linguistic strategies may lead to the difference between male and female learners in the amount of speech, the number of topics which they may raise in the classroom, and generally speaking the communication strategies which they apply. Therefore, those involved in teaching language programs, particularly teachers, should take gender differences into account while teaching male and female learners.

Suggestions for Further Studies

This study explored gender linked differences in the use of linguistic strategies in face-to-face communications. It seems that it could be significant if gender linked differences in written communications such as letters and e-mails are investigated as well. Also, gender linked differences in communication strategies used by males and females in different circumstances, particularly in classrooms, need to be explored.

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