The Speech Differences between Women and Men

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Do women and men talk differently? What makes the differences between women's and men's languages happen? Why do such differences play an important role in cross – gender conversation? According to a vast amount of research and evidence in this area, it appears that there is a wide range of women's and men's interaction styles even though they speak the same language (Tannen 1990:3). This report will provide an overview of stereotypes about women's speech, the different features of cross – gender speech styles, and two theories as possible explanations: the Dominance Theory and Difference Theory which are used to explain the differences between women's and men's use of language.

An overview of stereotype ideology about women talk

Many of us may have heard a number of terms and proverbs which describe women's speech such as

Gossip	*Nag*	*Chatter*
Rabbit	*Yak*	*Natter*

- *Nothing is so unnatural as a talkative man or a quiet woman.*

  (Scotland)

- *Foxes are all tails and women are all tongues.*

  (England)

- *A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail; they are never still.*

  (England)

- *Many women, many words; many geese, many turds.*
  (England)
- *A whistling sailor, a crowing hen, and a swearing woman ought all three go to hell together.*
  (United States)
- *The North Seas will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for a word.*
  (Jutland)
- *All the Daddies on the bus go read, read, read...All the Mummies on the bus go chatter, chatter, chatter.*
  (British children's song)
- *Où femme y a , silence n' y a (Where woman is, silence is not)*
  (France)
- *The tongue is the sword of a woman and she never lets it become rusty.*
  (China)

(Coates 1986 cited in McKay and Hornberger 1996: 230; Thomas and Wareing 2002: 75)

Although there are a large number of common stereotypes used to refer to women's talk around the world, plenty of evidence and research show a great contradiction in the stereotypes. On average, men are found to talk twice as much and as long as women no matter whether in single-sex communication or mixed- sex conversations (Swan 1998 cited by Coates, 1998: 186; Thomas and Wareing, 2002: 76). The evidence for how much females and males are expected to talk is also found in school classrooms. Not only in UK school classrooms but also in my English classes, the evidence shows coincidently that boys talk more than girls and twice as long as the average time that girls do in the class. One explanation which Spender (1985 cited in McKay and Hornberger 1996: 230) gives for why women are

thought of as the talkative gender is that women have traditionally been associated with the topics of family, relationships, household tasks, and emotions. Based on those topics, society seems to claim that females talk too much even though they talk relatively little.

The different features of cross – gender speech styles

The book *Men are from Mars, women are from Ve*nus by John Gray (1992) shows that men (Martians) and women (Venusians) are basically different from each other in ways of thinking and communication.

Differences between men and women

Martians (men)	Venusians (women)
• Men value power, competency, efficiency, and achievement. • Men need to prove themselves and achieve goals. • Men are continually working to develop their power and skills. • Men are honored when others seek their advice – it's a sign of wisdom. They also believe autonomy is a symbol of efficiency, power, and competence. • When women share problems, mistakenly men think solutions are what women need. • If something is working, in the opinion of men, leave it alone.	• Women are concerned with people and feelings. • Women need listening to, closeness, not solutions. • Women get value from the quality of their relationships. • Women are comfortable with offering help or needing help. • If something is working, in the opinion of women, it can be improved.

Table 1 Differences between males and females by Gray (1992)

According to the table above, the differences between men and women tend to develop different genres of speech and different skills for doing things with words, and also affect the way they interact with each other.

Due to having different sub-cultural rules for speaking, men and women seem to speak different languages (Coates 1998: 420).

Table 2 Speech differences between females and males by Gray (1992)

Speaking different languages - When men and women are on the verge of arguing, they are generally misunderstanding each other. They need a translation. - Both can make little changes without sacrificing who they are. In fact, they generally should avoid making big changes.	
Martians (men)	**Venusians (women)**
• Men take all conversation literally, looking at the facts, especially when women generalize. • Men see doing things without support as a good thing. • Men need women to say "I trust you can do it, and trust you will ask if you need help." • Men will ask for advice when they see they can't do something alone. If they get help before this point, it will bother them and they feel weak. It may be an insult. • Men usually turn away from a fight with women and say "give me some time, I'll be back." • Men tend to say "I'm sorry," but it doesn't mean "I apologize."	• Women use generalizations, like "always", "never", "nothing", "no one", "everyone." • Women feel that a supportive relationship is a good thing. • Women can support men without offering advice. Women need to learn how to share their feelings without offering advice. • Women will be upset when they are not understood, not listened to, and feel ignored by men. • Women need to show trust to men and reassure men with "it's not your fault." • Women need reassurance.

The two tables above, which summarize concepts by Gray (1992: 17-25, 75-113), coincide nicely with numerous social psychology studies and recent sociolinguistic findings from the University of California at Santa Barbara and the University of Pennsylvania that men and women do not speak the same way in cross-gender communication and have different sets of sub-cultural norms which cause difficulties and miscommunication in cross-sex conversations (Maltz and Broker 1982: 196-197).

Women's speech features

Females contribute certain features while having interactions in cross-gender conversation. Their speaking patterns, especially interaction strategies, show an obvious continuity with the talk of girls.

- Rapport Talk / Intimacy

Through playing with same sex mates in childhood, women automatically learn to use language for creating relationships of closeness, equality, and criticizing others in acceptable ways. Moreover, women tend to use a question – answer pattern to show their interest and continue the conversation (Tannen 1990: 199).

For example: While David, an American Sign Language interpreter, is talking about

ASL, a female audience member automatically uses the question pattern in this conversation.

David : So, and this is the one that's Berkerley. This is The Berkerley sign for Christmas.

Deborah : Do you figure it out those, um, correspondences when you learn the signs? or does somebody tell you?

David : Uh, someone tells me, usually.

- Involvement

Women tend to keep the conversation flowing smoothly and encourage their interlocutors to continue speaking by using supportive signs or minimal responses both verbal and non-verbal, such as *mm, yeah, mm hmm* and *nodding, smiling, frowning* and by other body language including gestures to show the meanings of "*I'm listening – please continue*" (Maltz and Broker 1982:421-422). The example of Coates (1998: 465) shows that women also add comments throughout streams of talk in order to keep the conversation going.

For example: Two friends talking over a coffee at Max's place.

Max : I got a phone call from Pat's mother saying 'you're a complete bastard.' 'Pat told us what you did to her. You're so inconsiderate.' (my quotation marks)

Nell : Oh dear.

Max : Well, I don't know what to say under such stress. What did they want me to do?

Nell : mm...tricky... Did you ask her?

Max : No. I have no idea what story Pat told them.

Nell : mm... Well, perhaps they were just over-reacting from worry about their daughter.

This conversation shows the intimate talk between Max and Nell. Whereas Max expresses frustration from Pat's mom calling. Nell expresses solidarity toward him in his distress and in the interaction by using questions and encouraging responses such as *mm... tricky*, and *oh dear*.

- Focusing on Metamessage

Tannen (1990) says the metamessage is the individual's interpretation of how a communication was intended. Women have basic social interaction skills called "women's intuition" (Coates 1998:450) which can help them read situations and learn to get things right from the indirect expressions of their speakers' speech. Although "women's intuition" benefits women in deciphering and interpreting the level of closeness and criticism of other women, it can cause lots of troubles in cross-gender communication.

For example: A husband talks to his wife about their daughter calling.

Jake: Look, I don't care if it's important or not, when a kid calls its mother the mother should answer.

Louise: Now, I'm a bad mother.

Jake: I didn't say that.

Louise: It's in your stare.

Jake: Is that another thing you know? My stare?

This conversation from Coates (1998: 451) shows that Jake and Louise have a fight because they focus on different levels of talk. While Jake focuses on the message by asking the question of whether she replied when their daughter, Edie called, Louise ignores the message and goes for the metamessage: his implication is that she's a bad mother. Although Jake doesn't say this statement, Louise interprets from how he looked-his stare.

- Using more "*Hedges*" and "*Epistemic modal forms*"

Thomas and Wareing (2002) report that women are more likely to use **hedges** and **epistemic modal forms** in conversations than men do. Women apply hedges as linguistic forms to dilute an assertion in interaction; for example, *I think*, *sort of*, and *kind of*. They also use epistemic modal forms or modal auxiliary verbs (Thomas and Wareing 2002: 77) namely *should*, *would*, *could*, *may*, and *might* to indicate explicitly the speakers' attitude about what they are talking about. Women use epistemic modal forms or logical probability modals (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 142) in their talk because they don't want to sound completely assertive about something. Besides hedges and epistemic modal forms, women tend to use other words which have similar meanings and functions such as *perhaps*, *maybe*, *really*, and *tag questions* namely *isn't it*.

For example: A. I'm going upstairs to study now.

B. I guess maybe I could think about going upstairs to study now.

Two statements (Thomas and Wareing 2002:77) show the way women use hedges and epistemic modal forms in their speaking in sentence B, whereas men tend to speak as in sentence A.

- Using the pronouns "you" and "we"

McKay and Hornberger (1996: 237) and Hudson (1996: 142) report that women's interaction styles are likely to be nurturing, supportive, and cooperative when compared with men's. Women tend to include the person they are discussing with by using the pronoun "we" or other generalizations like "everyone" to share feelings, create conversation bonds, and give confirmation. They also use the pronoun "you" to acknowledge the existence of other speakers in the conversation.

Men's speech features

Several studies of gender difference in speaking show that men also keep and continue their childhood's speaking patterns when they grow up.

- Report Talk / Information

In conversation, men are likely to use language to maintain their status as well as power and protect themselves from others who attempt to take away their chance to speak. Through playing with boy peer groups in childhood, Maltz and Broker (1982: 207-208) claim that men learn how to assert their position of dominance by giving verbal commands, attracting and maintaining an audience, asserting themselves when other speakers have the floor, and holding relationships primarily through their activities. Based on these skills, conversation for men becomes a contest. "A man is an individual in a hierarchical social order in which he is either one-up or one-down." When compared with women's talk, men tend to give "report" more than build up "rapport" even in private conversation (Tannen 1990: 24).

For example: The interaction between husband and wife at dinner table.

Ann : That meeting I had to go today was just awful.

Bob : Where was it?

Ann : In the NLC building. People were just so aggressive.

Bob : Mm. Who was there?

Ann : Oh, the usual representatives of all the government departments. I felt really put down at one point, you know, just so humiliated.

This conversation from Coates (1998: 464) shows that Ann's point is to try to share how she felt about the meeting and that she hopes to receive her husband's support, sympathy, and understanding. On the contrary, Bob paid attention only to the details of what she said.

- Minimal responses

Wardhaugh (2002: 325) reports that men and women use minimal responses – that show they are listening - differently in interaction. Minimal responses in men's conversation have stronger meanings, namely "*I agree with you*" or at least "*I follow your argument so far*" but are applied less often than in women's conversations. Men also react or respond slowly to what they hear. Thus, this leads to problems in cross-gender conversation because women believe that men's delayed minimal responses show a lack of interest or support to what they are saying.

- Focusing on messages & problem solving

Coates (1998:451) reports that men usually stick to the message or fact that they hear in conversation and also tend to provide suggestions or problem solving even though their interlocutors do not ask for it. On the other hand, women tend to be sensitive to what their talk tells about and how their participants feel from interactions.

For example: A husband talking over the wife's breast operation.

The woman who had a breast operation and felt she had been cut into and that the seam of the stitches 'had changed the contour of her breast.' Her husband replies with only one sentence to his wife: 'You can have plastic surgery to cover up the scar and restore the shape of your breast.' Then the following dialogue goes on:

Woman : I'm not having any more surgery! I'm sorry you don't like the way it looks.

Man : I don't care. It doesn't bother me at all.

Woman : Then why are you telling me to have plastic surgery?

Man : Because you were saying you were upset about the way it looked.

This example from Cotes (1998: 451) shows that woman and man focus on different points in a conversation. Whereas the woman wants to show how she feels about the operation and needs his empathy, the man reacts to his wife's complaint by taking the role of problem solver and giving her advice about what she should do about this problem.

- A greater tendency to have a sense of humor

On average, men usually use language to perform storytelling, joke telling, and other narrative events to maintain audiences and get more chances to speak in conversations. Men tend to tell jokes and stories much better than women because they learn these from interacting with other boys in their childhood. They also learn how to deal with series of challenges from audiences such as mockery and side comments on the stories. They learn to control listeners, and to continue their stories when receiving no support from audiences. Although audiences express forms of verbal aggression, namely put-downs and insults while listening to the speakers' speech, these signs can be accepted as normal, friendly interaction among male friends (Coates, 1998: 425-427, 429).

Theories of Possible explanation: Dominance and Difference

Based on the variations of language features, women and men tend to speak and behave differently in a speech situation even though they live in the same cultural and linguistic world. Scholars interpret this difference by using two theories: Dominance and Difference.

- Dominance Theory

This theory focuses on the differences in social power between women and men as the main cause of variation. Since women and men have different speech styles from their childhood, men use language for expression of dominance in cross-gender conversation. Unlike girls' talk, Richard Savin-Williams (1996 cited by Coates, 1998: 426) shows that boys use the following speech patterns as signs of dominance:

1. Giving verbal commands or orders namely "*Come here*".
2. Name calling or other forms of verbal ridicule like "*You're a nerd*".
3. Verbal threats or boasts of authority such as "*If you don't give it to me, I'll beat you up.*"
4. Refusal to obey orders.
5. Winning a verbal argument as in the sequence namely "*I was there first*".

Apparent differences in usage reflect speech differences in women and men and lead to the result of men's power and women's subordination. Dominance Theory also shows that men's authority in the role of power and women's inferiority in the role of submission are the result of traditional social differences and can be seen through a variety of linguistic behaviors namely interruptions, minimal responses, and tag questions. This explanation is quite clear in some situations such as business meetings, in which women generally find it difficult to get the right to speak, often get interrupted, and do not have their points taken as seriously as men's are (Fishman, 1980 and DeFranciso, 1991 cited by Thomas and Wareing, 2002: 79). This higher incidence of interruptions is seen in the relatively high social and economic status of men because men's speech styles are more assertive in public places.

- Difference Theory

This theory focuses on the personality differences between women and men which affect the way they communicate with each other. Women and men use speech to deal with sociolinguistic subcultures. Both women and men start learning different kinds of subcultures at the age of five or earlier through playing with same sex peer groups. Due to spending most of their lives spatially and intentionally separated, women and men have different experiences and talk in different social interests. They are likely to develop different genres of speech and different skills for doing things with words when they grow up. Women and men carry the same patterns of language use from childhood into adulthood because they tend to continue these speaking patterns of single-sex friendship relations. Thus, women's and men's subcultural norms affect their behaviors in conversations. While women long for intimacy, understanding, collaboration, and support in interaction, men learn to manipulate in conversation with their peers to get power and maintain status. The different social needs of women and men make them learn a different set of speech patterns and can lead them to miscommunication in cross-gender conversation (Coates, 1998: 420-427; McKay and Hornberger, 1996: 231-240).

Conclusion

My purpose in writing this paper is to provide more understanding about the speech differences between women and men. My own observations about this topic show that the different speaking features of cross-gender interaction not only appear in my classes such as Sociolinguistics class, intensive English program, and English I, II, and IV, but also in families and from conversations in the streets, and coincide nicely with a large amount of research from western society. Women and men tend to talk differently because they grow up in different social worlds and use different sets of social interac-

tion patterns. For example, my brothers and I have the same level of education and live in the same house, but we still misunderstand each other in conversations and are likely to have different interests. Based on the idea of nurture, this gives strong support to the idea that women and men gradually learn and build up the differences of language use through associating with same sex peer groups in early age. In *Sociolinguistic Universal Tendencies*, Holmes (1998 cited by Wardhaugh, 2002: 320) makes five testable claims of gender speech differences:

1. Women and men develop different sets of speech patterns.

2. Women focus on the affective function of interaction more than men do.

3. Women use linguistic devices to stress solidarity more than men do.

4. Women interact to maintain and increase solidarity while men maintain power and status.

5. Women are stylistically more flexible than men.

From my observation, the differences in language features between women and men can be explained by the two theories: the Dominance Theory and the Difference theory. They are useful tools to help us understand and overcome the difficulties in cross-gender communication.

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