

英语语言中性别差异现象的研究

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摘要: 英语语言中的性别差异是一种普遍存在的语言学现象。由于一系列原因, 女性和男性使用语言的时候在以下四个方面有明显的区别: 选词, 音调, 句法以及会话风格。本文以莱卡夫关于两性语言差异的相关理论为基础, 她认为女性话语与男性截然不同, 这种差异可以从女性更多使用反义疑问句, 更少使用粗俗语言以及避免禁忌语中反映出来。基于此理论本文旨在探讨英语语言中性别差异现象的四个表现及其成因以此来为人们更好的认识性别语言提供指导与帮助, 最终得出结论英语语言中的性别差异现象是由于不同的因素造成的并且对我们的生活与学习产生越来越重要的影响。

关键词: 英语语言、性别差异、成因、因素

Introduction

The gender difference has always been the core subject of linguistics especially as the development of feminism in the western countries since the 1960s. Many great researchers and linguists have made important contributions to the further study of this subject.

Professor Zhang Ruolan (2003) explored gender differences from the perspective of vocabulary, intonation, syntax and discourse style in her paper. In addition, many other linguists and professional workers have done researches to clarify the reasons and causes of gender differences and they made contributions. Jalobovits(1970) investigates to discover that among all the factors affecting the language learning, motivation accounts for 33%. Research shows that female learners have stronger motivation than male learners. Female learners show more comprehensive learning motivation and positive attitude in language learning. They show higher interest in the target language and the culture. They get satisfaction from the reaction to the surroundings. But the learning motivation of male learners is primarily from the supervision and enforcement of teachers and parents. Meanwhile, male learners are reluctant to try something boring and dull. Most of them complain that it's too dull to learn English. Jennifer Coates outlined the historical range of approaches to gendered speech in her book *Women, Men and Language*. She argued that "There are at least four approaches to the investigation of gendered language.

They are deficit, dominance, difference and dynamic approaches.” (Coates, 1997) Professor Yang Yongling(2004) generalized ten theories to explain this phenomenon which includes innate differences, male domination theory, individual differences, cultural cultivation and so on. With the development of linguistics, gender differences has become more and more important in the linguistic circles around the world. Therefore based on other people’ s conclusion and theories, this paper aims to clarify gender differences explicitly and analyze the causes of it from different angles. According to some investigations and analysis at hand, there do exist gender differences between men and women.

Generally speaking, men are more inclined to use some impolite and direct words while women typically use euphemism and polite expressions. This is because men are more confident and dominant than women. They believe they are the ruler of society and family so there is no need to hide their feelings. The long time feudal society contributed a lot to this phenomenon. Under this circumstance, women are vulnerable in front of men and their language is weaker in choice of words than that of men, which incurred them gender discrimination in language.

The gender difference in language is a kind of linguistic phenomenon, reflected from social, cultural and some other aspects. It exists pervasively in different countries and social systems. As a common social phenomenon, it is bound to be reflected from the languages involved. It has always been one of the most attractive topics for sociolinguists. Early in the 17th century, the Caribbean area published reports about different discourse styles between men and women. Although many centuries have passed, researchers still want to dig deeper in this area and they do this with great passion. Actually, there are many differences between the two different genders, which can be illustrated from the following theory. According to difference theory, two person can have totally different ways of speaking when they are exposed to and reared in different environment and culture even if they are of the same group(Uchida,1992). Generally speaking, even living in the same environment men and women can establish different social relations, just like they live in different environments and societies. This difference drives them to generate different ways to use language. All in all, this paper intents to explore some differences between females and males existing in English language from the perspective of sociolinguistics. It also aims to find out the causes of these

differences. Correct understanding of gender differences in English language can help us to grasp the relationship between language and culture. It is also of great value for us to improve language ability and communicative ability.

1 Gender and language

Everyone has his own style in the practice of his own language and his differences with each other as to the choices of words and syntactic structures. The differences between different genders are extremely obvious and thus deserve our attention.

1.1 The definition of language

It is difficult to give a satisfactory definition to language and many linguists have put forward their own ideas.

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communication ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.” (Sapir, 1921)

“Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory arbitrary symbols.” (Hall, 1968)

“From now on I will consider language to be a set finite or infinite of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements” (Chomsky, 1957)

Each of these definition has its own special emphasis, and is not totally free of limitations. However, there are some important characteristics of human language that linguists have agreed on; these are embraced in the following generally accepted definition: Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. The definition has captured the main features of language and thus is recognized by the public.

1.2 The relationship between gender and language

It is known that different genders have their own ways of speaking and the question has become one of the main concerns which attracts the attention of many linguists. Gender and language have some intrinsic and inherent correlations and it is the responsibility of linguists to unveil this kind of relation.

Generally speaking, females often exhibit such characteristics as elegant, warm-hearted and educated while males mainly show their masculine characteristics such as confident and brave. “Women tend to use linguistic forms that reflect and

reinforce a subordinate role. These include tag questions, question intonation and weak directives.” (Lakoff, 2004) Such differences in language are caused by their inborn genetic differences to a large extent. That is to say, different gender exhibits different ways of using language naturally and spontaneously.

2 Manifestation of gender differences in English

Gender difference is pervasive in almost all the languages thus it attracts many linguists to study this subject. Not only is it the field of linguistics but also it is the focus of social study because it links closely with the development of society. From the papers and books written by other linguists we know gender differences in English are mainly reflected in four aspects. They are vocabulary, intonation, syntax and discourse style.

2.1 Vocabulary

The difference in the use of vocabulary is one of the main concerns of linguists. According to Lakoff, gender differences in English language mainly show themselves in the following three aspects. Firstly, male and female are different in the use of adjectives. Females are known to use more adjectives to show their feelings and emotion, such as lovely, cute, fantastic and excessively while males rarely use this kind of words. For example, we often hear a woman says “Oh, you looks so lovely in this dress” “The rain is excessively terrible” and so on, in our daily life; but the frequency of these words to be said from a man’ s mouth is much lower. The reason behind this phenomenon may be that females are born with more passion than males and they feel more natural and obliged to say these adjectives. Secondly, females can use more exact words to describe colors than males. For instance, women will use such uncommon words as mauve, beige, lavender, azure and aquamarine to express the exact color of something while males mainly use more common and general words to describe colors. This is because women traditionally do the spinning and weaving in home and therefore they are more acute to color than men. Besides, women are more attentive to daily life than men, so they can remember these unusual words and use them freely. Thirdly, females use more euphemism in communication than males do. Women’ s choice of words is more mild and gentle than that of men. A case in

point is the situation that curses and swear words are mainly said by male rather than by female. In addition, the frequency of personal relationship breakdown is much higher in male's communication than in female's. We all know women are more considerate and temperate than men so they are less likely to say something that will hurt other's feelings and hamper the relationship. Instead when they are in dispute with others or when they have to say something unpleasant they will choose to say something equal to the original meaning but less abrasive and rude.

2.2 Pronunciation and intonation

Gender differences are not only reflected in the use of vocabulary but also in intonation and pronunciation. Language is a social behavior and in the course of our communication with others gender differences reflected from intonation is a deep social mark. According to certain researches, the tension degree of women is much higher than that of men when pronouncing words and thus women's articulation is more clear. At the same time, women prefer to open their mouths more exaggerated than men when pronouncing vowels because they want to make their pronunciation more standard and richer. In a survey conducted in 1999, linguists discovered that men are inclined to pronounce /ng/as /n/ such words as talking, going, and learning. The average rate of middle class men to make this mistake is 63.8% while the figure of women is just 15.3%. That is to say, the pronunciation of female approaches more closely to the standard form than that of male. In terms of intonation, we have found that women would like to use raising tone while the intonation of men is more stable because they want to show their calm and confidence. Women also change their intonation more frequently in order to show different feelings. According to Lakoff's research, women would like to use raising tone to answer questions. For example, when someone ask them "When do you want to see a movie?" they would reply "Oh, at three o'clock" with raising tone. This shows women's temperate characteristic and their low degree of confidence.

2.3 Syntax

In communication women use tag questions frequently to make their opinions sound more polite and reasonable. For instance, when appraising something, women will always use tag questions: "This dress is beautiful, isn't it?" "These kids are lovely, aren't they?" while male will use statements directly "This dress is beautiful." "These kids are lovely." This is because men are more confident than women and women are more afraid of offending others. Besides when expressing their wishes and demands, women often use such syntactic structures as "Would you

mind...?” “Would you please..?” while men would express themselves directly with an imperative sentence . In the long time of male dominated society women have a lower social position than male so they are more careful in the use of language. Women would choose to say something that is correct and will not inflict misunderstandings in daily life, so they rarely use ungrammatical sentences. According to some linguists, when it comes to the use of ungrammatical sentence forms, men have a much higher frequency than women who would pay more attention to grammar rules. For example, a man would say a sentence like this “He runs too slow.” and “I done that” while women would say a complete and grammatical sentence like “He runs too slowly.” and “I have done that.” This difference shows that women are more careful and sensitive to the use of language than men.

2.4 Discourse Style

In communication women appear to be more elegant and exquisite while men give the impression of being confident and unconstrained. It is known that women are more cooperative than men and are more willing to comply with the principles of discourse. Women would pay more attention to the speaker and would not interrupt the speaker randomly while men are more absent minded than women during communication and they will interrupt others whenever they want to express themselves. In our traditional concept men are the dominated group of our society and women are in subordinate position. This makes the differentiation of topic and contents in their discourse. The topics of women are mainly family, children, marriage, cooking, clothing and gossip while men are more interested in sports, politics, economy and tax revenue. This difference demonstrates that there are more cases of relationship breakdown among men than among women because men often take initiative to interrupt others in the course of communication while women generally listen to those who interrupt them and keep silent when listening to others.

3 Gender discrimination in English language

Since the language used by female and male is different and has different characteristics, it is bound to arouse gender discrimination, causing troubles and offenses to women.

3.1 Discrimination of language in English

Gender discrimination is defined as prejudice against women by men on the basis of sex. When it is reflected in language we call it “discrimination of language” . It can be commonly seen in English language. For example, when we say “Each of them

should hand in his homework.”, we don't mean boys only but boys and girls. In addition we use host to refer to masculine host but hostess when the host is female. From it we can see the words used to describe women are based on the words of men mainly by adding a suffix -ess. Many other words can approve this conclusion like actor, actress, waiter, waitress, god and goddess. Gender discrimination is pervasive in the world language, just like a mirror revealing the traditional concept in our society: men is better than women and occupy higher position than women. English is a language which entails discrimination towards women because it has many words that depreciate women. For example, “black widow spider”, “Black Maria”, “iron maiden”, “Venus fly trap”, “Hurricane Betsy” and so on. In addition when describing human beings we usually put male words before female such as “man and woman” and “husband and wife”. This can also reflect our discrimination towards females. There are many corresponding words when it refers to different genders such as master/mistress, bachelor/spinster, governor/governess and so on but the words describing females all have another meaning which depreciate female semantically. Spinster and bachelor all refer to someone who have not get married yet, but spinster is derogatory and insulting while bachelor is not. Sometimes the same word can imply different meaning when it is used to describe different genders. For example, “He is loose.” “She is loose.”; “He is a tramp.” “She is a tramp.” From these examples we can see gender discrimination still exists in English. The famous linguist Peter Trudgill once numerated an example to prove the idea. *New York Times* reported the information of condidates in supreme court. When it is a female condidate the report mainly focused on her appearance, her husband's occupation and named her as Mrs. Feinstein but when it is a male condidate, the report called him as Mr. Alioto and didn't mention his wife. In English many slangs also reflect gender discrimination. We have the following slangs which attack women. For example “Women are women, deeds are men.” “A women, a dog and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they will be.” “Long hair and short wit.” “Women, wind and fortune are ever changing.” “A man of straw is of a woman of gold.”) and so on. The prejudice against women also reflects in the lines of some literary works. For instance, Shakespeare once portrayed women as “Frailty, thy name is woman.” and “A woman and a glass are ever in danger.”

3.2 The development of gender discrimination in English

Since the 1960s the feminism in western countries have devoted to eliminate discrimination against females and now the movement changes many aspects in our daily life. Language is a mirror of society, so through it we can see every areas of our social life and the changes of itself. During World War II many men sacrificed in the war, causing some changes to the current social structure. More and more women

began to take the positions which former belonged to men and social division of labor also changed. So is our language. Therefore some new words appeared like female judge, madam chairman, sportswomen and so on. Nowadays people are more and more sensitive to gender language, so they would try to avoid gender language as much as possible in order to show respect to females. Although the practice of Feminist movement has never stopped and relevant laws have been enacted to protect women' s right, gender discrimination still can be seen frequently in our daily life.

From the analysis above ,we can easily reach the conclusion that the discrimination against women in language is still not totally eliminated from our life and we should try our best to avoid this prejudice as much as possible.

4 Causes of gender differences

Gender difference is an extremely complex phenomenon which involves many factors like social status, the level of literacy and geological environment. Previous studies have generalized many different causes to account for this phenomenon but investigation found that physiological factor, psychological factor, historical factor, cultural factor and social factor are the leading factors that contribute to gender difference in English language.

4.1 Physical factor

The inborn differences between women and men determine it that there must exist some different points in their speech. According to the latest medical research, women' left hemisphere gets mature earlier than that of male in terms of the development of language ability. Therefore girls speak more fluent and with more emotion than boys from the very beginning. In addition, in most voice experiment, men differ from women in resonance peak, thus the quality of voice changes because of gender. What' s more, women' s speech organs are also different from men' s. Specifically speaking, women' s vocal cords are shorter and thinner than men' s and the degree of tense is worse than men' s. Women mainly pursue elegance and standards when speaking and they prefer to use raising tones with full passion while men mainly use falling tones with fewer changes. These innate differences all contribute to gender differences in English language and we can say it is inevitable that there

are some differences between female speech and male speech with full confidence.

4.2 Psychological factor

Until now, the influential explanation of gender differences is given from the perspective of social psychology linguistics. According to social linguists men are fond of transferring their power to control others, including women; while women have the sense of frail and weak so they will quit the power struggle in conversation automatically and seek other choices to protect themselves in conversation with men and mutual support in conversation with women. In addition women are more emotional and easy to be evoked, so in our daily conversation they are more inclined to use circumflex tones to express their strong feelings and emotion when compared with men. Therefore men rarely use circumflex tones. From the analysis above we know the difference in thinking between men and women is also an important factor that contributes to gender differences in English language.

4.3 Social factor

Lakoff and many other linguists assume that gender difference in English reflects the different social roles of females and males anticipated by our society. According to many gender stereotype researches, men are recognized as more competitive and self-centred while women are more emotional and helpful. Therefore, everyone's action should not violate these inherent stereotype. The different social roles and actions of females and males are even decided before they are born. When a boy is delivered he is anticipated to act like a man with masculine while a girl is reared like a girl. This difference can be seen from clothing, accompany, and toys but the most striking difference is in their language. At the same time, the difference of "potential reputation" also contributes to gender differences in English language. Generally speaking, non standard language form is associated with lower social status while standard form is related to higher social reputation. Since non standard form is similar to the living features of those who live at the bottom of society, such as rude and tenacious; it is seen as desirable features of masculine, which has "potential prestige". Some noble men may give up the standard form to acquire the potential prestige which signifies masculine. By comparison, women would prefer standard form to obtain higher social position but when some non

standard form can sign femininity women would abandon standard form. Language is closely related to society, so social factor play a decisive role in gender differences in English language.

4.4 Historical factor

Every language can reflect the social ideology. In the development of world history males occupy the absolute power in society, thus forms the gender differences in English language and even prejudice against females. For example, in the world of English countries, the longtime feudal society was actually dominated by male and they had a firm grasp over the discourse in society all the time. This contributes to gender discrimination against women in social ideology among western culture. Throughout thousands of years of history in western countries, the shackle of feudal society has deeply affected the development of society in many aspects. So is language. A series of feudal thinking has deeply influenced the development of female language, forcing them to use a weaker language "female language." Thus females become a vulnerable group in our society not only in strength but also in language. From the information above we can easily conclude that women hold a low social status as well as be discriminated in language. As a matter of fact, this phenomenon is not confined in English speaking countries but all over the world. All in all, gender differences in English language have profound historical reasons.

4.5 Cultural factor

More and more evidences of modern researches show that gender differences in English language may have something to do with the different subculture which the two genders belonging to. Subculture is defined as a division of the whole culture; it is the special aspects in different areas and culture brought about by some social and natural reasons. For example, because of the differences in living environment, customs and religious beliefs a unified national culture can shape different subculture with its own characteristics. Therefore many researchers believe that gender differences in English language is the reflection of different subculture that the two genders belong to. Society designates different life experience to different genders and dictates them how to be men and women. That is to say, speech is a behavior of acquisition. When talking about how different genders acquire

communication skills and speech acts in their separate subcultures, Maltz and Borker pointed out that women typically use “mhm” to show they are listening while men usually use it as an agreement. Besides according to their further researches, there are differences between females and males in the pragmatical function of questions, the proposal of opinion and the attitude and comprehension towards questions. For example, women use question as a means of continuing conversation while men use it as a way of obtaining information. Women are more willing to discuss and share personal issues to seek support and console while men mainly focus on finding the solutions and giving their opinions in front of public. Therefore subculture factor is also a factor that can not be ignored of gender differences in English language.

Conclusion

The paper first gives a clear definition of language and the interrelationship between gender and language. Through the relationship we know that there are differences between females and males when using language. Taking English as an example, the paper shows explicitly the differences in vocabulary, intonation, syntax and discourse style. By giving examples and comparison we can have a better understanding of gender differences in English. Since there are differences between different genders, it is bound to give rise to gender discrimination. We explored the history of gender discrimination and the causes of it. Gender difference is an important field in sociolinguistics, so we should trace the causes behind it. This paper attempts to explain this phenomenon in the following five aspects: physical, psychological, historical, cultural and social.

As an important tool for people in social life, language develops simultaneously as society develops. Social life is the basis of gender difference in language while gender difference counterreflects social life. The relationship between language and society is extremely complex and intricate therefore it is difficult to give a complete and thorough explanation to it. Only by standing on the basis of previous study, focusing on credible experiment and figures and taking many aspects into consideration can we give a scientific and object conclusion to this subject.

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An Analysis of Gender Differences in English Language

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Abstract: Gender difference in English language is a common linguistic phenomenon, which exists pervasively in our life. Due to a series of causes, men and women are different in terms of choices of words, intonation, syntax and discourse style when they use language. The thesis is, based upon the theory of Robin Lakoff, who proposes that the speech of women can be distinguished from that of men in a number of ways including hedges, empty adjectives, tag questions, indirect questions and the avoidance of coarse languages, to explore the manifestations of gender differences in English language

and the causes behind them, to provide guidance for people to understand gendered language in a better way, and to naturally jump into the conclusion that gender differences in English language are caused by various factors.

Keywords: English language; gender difference; causes; factors