

GENDER AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Language acquisition is a complex and lengthy process that has many levels and is affected by different variables. A Sociolinguistic approach to Language Acquisition (LA) is one that studies the relationship between social contextual variables. This review paper intends to focus on one of the variables of language acquisition i.e. gender, which is an important factor in First and Second Language Acquisition. A brief overview of research studies and general trends in sociolinguistic gender over time is presented in order to explore relationship of gender and its role in first and second language acquisition.

Keywords: Genderlect; Language Acquisition; Language Change/Maintenance; Bilingualism; Multilingualism; Language Variation.

INTRODUCTION

If men are from Mars and women from Venus, so their language is bound to be different, as well. The genderlect hypothesis believes that there are differences in men and women language usage marking it stereotypically masculine or feminine, and has been a focus of much research. Tannen (1990) came up with the term ‘genderlect’ to contain all such discussion. This controversial hypothesis suggests that social stereotypes are reinforced because of these proposed linguistic differences between men and women (Motschenbacher, 2007).

A Sociolinguistic approach to Language Acquisition (LA) is one that studies the relationship between social contextual variables as interlocutor, topic or task, age, gender, social class, individual variations and the recognized characteristics of learner’s first language (L1) or inter language (IL) production (Lantolf et. al., 2006). Ellis (1997) believes age, gender, social class and ethnic identity play a vital role in second language learning and is the result of different kinds of bilingualism. However, Ellis (ibid) warns against that it is not only these features which dictate second language (L2) competence but it is the social circumstances and approaches that these variables are contextualised in. Furthermore, the relationship that these variables share with each other also plays a significant role in L2 learning.

We will focus on one of the variables of language acquisition i.e. gender, which is an important factor in First and Second Language acquisition. A definition of the term “gender” will be presented followed by a brief overview of studies and general trends in sociolinguistic gender over time. Later sections will shed light on gender and its relation to language; its role in L1 and L2 acquisition. We expect to present other social factors involved along with gender in producing different linguistic behaviours in L1 and L2 acquisition.

Gender

Giddens (1989:p.158) believes that the word *sex* suggests biological differences between men and women while *gender* is a more social concept which refers to psychological and social distinctions. De Beauvoir’s work, *The Second Sex* (1996), suggests “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” which helps to define the difference between sex and gender. It is safe to conclude that the gender differences reflected in the choice of lexical items are the cultural construction and are the result of the roles society has assigned to each gender.

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Language is a significant mode through which gender, a continuing social practice, is ordained or created; gender is an act performed by the individuals, partially with the help of language choices, as compared to an entity that individuals are or have (West and Zimmerman, 1987 cited in Ehrlich, 2004). Wodak and Benke (1997) argue that gender-specific studies are mostly ambiguous, considering the researcher's expectations about sex and gender, the framework, the population etc. They quote Eckert and McConnell (1992) who assert that the language used by females reveal certain aspects about their gender such as a female's linguistic choices has been believed to show their traditionalism, status perception, uncertainty, reverence, nurture, emotional eloquence, compassion for people around and solidarity. Men's language, on the other hand, is considered as demonstrating their roughness which is taken an important factor of masculinity, aggressiveness, freedom, capability, hierarchy and power. Studies make different claims that are often conflicting. For instance, some studies associate standard language and prestige with women while others with men, often depending upon the author's ideology about gender along with different social variables used in studies.

Sociolinguistic Gender Research

Initially, many studies addressing language and gender mostly contemplated the speech behaviour of females in terms of the insufficiency model: they termed the speech behaviour of male as tougher, rather significant and more needed (Lakoff, 1975). Over the decades, gender has been studied under different approaches; deficit theory, dominance theory (Cameron, et. al, 1992), difference theory (Cameron, et. al, 1992), constructivist approaches (Bohan, 1997). Two main seemingly contradictory findings in studies observing phonological variation: women adhere more easily to the standard than men (Ellis, 1989, 2004; Eckert and McConnell, 1992; 1995), and simultaneously are more willing to make changes. In addition, they ought to be better learners of an L2 (Gumperz, 2002). Some studies suggest that women's proficiency is significantly higher than men's (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996). Furthermore, some studies show that women have a more affirmative attitude towards learning an additional language (Zentall, 1987; Poplack, 1980; Ellis, 1997). Reposing on his (Ellis, 1997) earliest studies, Ellis (2012) finds that the women's abilities to embrace the unique structures of the L2 more openly and to change the incorrect forms more readily make them better language learners. Studies (e.g., Field, 2000; Chavez, 2001; Carr & Pauwels, 2009; Murphy, 2010) with different population such as Chinese students of English Language, Irish high school students yield the same results. These findings suggest that female language learners reflect greater desire to acquire the new items and make them part of their linguistic habits. A study (Shibamoto, 2007) conducted on the population speaking Japanese language found huge differences between the lexical items chosen by men and women. Common nouns like stomach, money, lunch box and water were used. Analysis of both genders' choice show that women tend to use the nouns with the polite prefix 'O' while men's vocabulary doesn't show such trend. The difference in the lexical choice of Japanese men and women is obviously not dictated by their biological differences.

Gender and Language

Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1972), amongst the first ones to research on gender and language in Western societies, consistently specified that women's language was more standard than men, regardless of their socioeconomic level, age, or race. Their research was often construed as the result of early childhood socialization processes (Lakoff, 1975; Maltz and Broker, 1982; Cameron, 1992). In regards to language acquisition, girls are appreciated to use "elegant" language while boys' language use is permitted more flexibility and roughness: "Rough talk is discouraged in little girls more strongly than in little boys, in whom parents may often find it more amusing than shocking" (Lakoff, 1975: 6). Cameron, et. al. (1992) suggests that children's activities shape different styles of speaking according to gender: "Boys tend to play in large group organized hierarchically: thus they learn direct, confrontational speech. Girls play in small groups of 'best friends', where they learn to maximize intimacy and minimize conflicts" (Cameron, et. al., 1992: 73). A number of research studies show that while learning second language female learners always show superiority (Burstall, 1975; Boyle, 1987; Ellis, 1997; Ehrlich, 2001). Another study (Van et al., 2015) attests that female language learners outperform males language learners. This study had a large population of 27,119 adult learners; this large population of language learners (speakers of 49 mother tongues from 88 countries) was learning Dutch as L2. Ven et. al.(ibid) concluded that overall performance of female learners was much better than male learners. The population of the study provided rich data, which validates its results. It also

confirms that the linguistic superiority that women show as children while acquiring L1 stay with them as adults. Rebecca Rogers' statement "language is the most feminized field in secondary education" (Rogers, 2006, p. 135) sounds like an outrageously sweeping statement but Ven et. al.'s (ibid) study provides it with quantitative support.

Gender and Language Change/Maintenance

It is generally agreed now that there is variation in the speech of male and female in terms of style; women tend towards the meticulous end of the continuum and males towards the less formal end. Labov (1990) highlights that women are more concerned about the apparent social status, thus they not only use the variants that are considered prestigious linguistically but are also careful to pick the variants that are conservative linguistically. While, men as asserted by Labov (ibid) are the other way around, thus they do not show any preference for linguistically prestigious items. However, during the continuing language change where the source of social prestige is from outside the group women to prefer frequently used new forms than men. Furthermore, Labov (ibid) identifies that among women, "hypercorrect" behaviour is significant while men tend to use more localized linguistic variants. Men use more localised versions as they offer desirable identity based on social meanings for men while women always prefer supra-local variants in speech. Labov (ibid) believes that women play a critical role in language modification, specifically because of their care-giving situation, raising the children. Young children receive most of their language input from mothers or other female care-givers. In some communities women are regarded as "guardians" of the language and culture, traditionally (Ehrlich, 2004), therefore they are expected to use hyper-correct forms of language, e.g. hyper-correct grammar, pronunciation, lexical items etc., whether teaching informally as mothers or in a more formal setup like school as teachers and librarians. Hence, women were traditionally expected to conserve language deemed proper in reference to pronunciation choice and grammatical structure. The expectation of perfect correctness represents women's role as the keeper of the cultural flame; while men went off to work and war to protect society, women stayed home to preserve its cherished values for transmission to future generations.

On the other hand, some communities expect women to mediate between the dominant and minority culture. Medicine (1987 cited in Ehrlich, 2004) coined a term "cultural broker" to emphasize the role of women in Native American communities where women become more proficient in English than men if exposed to English. Furthermore, women become more professional to be the major socialisers of children and taught them "that interaction between two different worlds required entirely different languages."

Zentella (1987) revealed that Spanish language use was associated more with female domains in an ethnographic study of Puerto Ricans in New York. The results from the study also suggested that in the same neighbourhood, females tended towards higher levels of maintenance and proficiency in Spanish than males. She described these trends in terms of social networks: "Girls were more likely than their brothers to be expected to do things and be with people that resulted in greater involvement with Spanish [...] Boys, on the other hand, could spend much more time outside of the house and off the block, away from Spanish" (Zentella, 1987). She also reported that her data revealed that the supreme prolific code-switchers were usually women and were also the best speakers of English and Spanish.

Language and Gender in Bilingual and Multilingual Setting

Many ethnographic studies reveal gender language use difference and acquisition in bilingual and multilingual settings. Given that there is no direct relationship between language and gender but is a byproduct of social practices and activities that become gendered in certain cultures and communities. Thus, social practices have effects on gendered-differentiated language use and acquisition. Hill (1987) investigates a Mexican community where women have restricted exposure to the prestige language (Spanish) because of the inaccessibility to market place and wage labour where Spanish is used. They are thought to "lag" linguistically i.e. they are thought to be speaking only Mexicano, thus monolingual. Their Mexicano is believed to be less influenced by Spanish and if they are able to speak any Spanish, will be more influenced by Mexicano. But Hill (1987) finds that in spite of their Spanish being generally poor due to lack of exposure to the language, women seem to exhibit a high sensitivity to Spanish norms; their use of Spanish stress patterns on borrowed Spanish nouns in Mexicano while for men the pattern is reverse. Hill concludes that men resist integrating into a different culture by highlighting their identities in relation to their native language.

Socioeconomic Factors, Gender and Languages

The complicated association between socioeconomic features, gender and linguistics choice was reflected by Klee (1987). Klee (ibid) observed that Mexican-American men are more prone to use Spanish in their daily routine as compared of their ethnicity. Klee (ibid) elucidated that this trend points out towards women's choice of professions as they prefer to work in service and professional jobs where language of communication was English, while men preferred jobs where English was not a pre-requisite. Spanish appeared to work as a language practiced by males to establish the identity that is masculine and belong to Mexican-American a group while English was considered a more "feminine language" (Sole, 1987,p. 133). Sole (1978) observed the same tendency among Mexican-American college students. Sole (ibid) linked this trend of female population of favoring English to their desire to get better job opportunities by assimilation to Anglo culture speaking. This also shows them a way to get freedom from the limitations imposed on them by the Mexican culture.

Another research carried out by Ehrlich (2008) where he reasoned that the different success rates of language learning in different gender is the result of learners' social situation rather than their gender differences; thus for the purpose of this research Ehrlich (ibid) proposed to measure what individuals do rather than who they are. This study shows that the motivation level is determined by the dynamic nature of gender differences, which makes it unique than the fixed character of both genders as discussed by previous researches. This social construct approach to language learning differences focuses on learning opportunities rather than language learning itself.

Reposing on Cummins' (1979) work, Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2014) asserted that socioeconomic status of second-language learners plays a significant role in the process of second language learning. Melby-leverg's work on second language learning asserts that language learners who are from higher socioeconomic status tend to use context-independent language at home which helps them producing better results in language learning. Harper and Pelletier (2008) study connects second language learning with socioeconomic status of learners as well as with their gender. Chiu & McBrideChang's (2016) study endorsing Mullis et. al. (2003) study asserts that if socioeconomic status remains same for both genders in a language class girls often score higher than boys. Abu-Rabia (2004) asserts that strategies employed by male and female language learners are different: while male learners tend to use more analytical strategies female finds global strategies more relevant (Oxford, 1994). Wei (2009) building on his research of Oxford (ibid) asserts that although both genders employ the same number of strategies, however, girls are comparatively adept at using strategies qualitatively. It is safe to conclude that when socioeconomic status is same, gender still affects language learning.

Variation within Gender Categories

Researchers often neglect within group variations. Milroy and Milroy (1980, 1987) studied within group variations and speech situation and looked at speech in social networks. Milroy and Milroy's (1980, 1987) study confirmed the view of women using mores standard forms than men but also gave a detailed account of the language behaviours perceived; (young) men are the focus of strong group pressure to use the localized version of language than females whereas women are claimed to have more linguistic freedom as the peer group pressure that forced men to use particular linguistic version embraces women choice of language warmly.

Nichols (1987) found that black women, in an all-black speech community, adopted the language which can help them to get better jobs. Women in the community adhered to Standard English because of their access to white collar jobs where Standard English was required. On the other hand, older women were restricted to their workplace where they had little access to Standard English. The different nature of males' and females' profession provides them exposure to different language varieties. Nichols (1983) asserts that females prefer jobs in public relation which requires frequent contact with other people (e.g. teacher, saleswoman) as compared to men which equips women with better control of more registers and language styles.

Language Variation in Adolescents

Eckert (1989) presents a study in order to explain the pressures faced by boys and girls in two different groups (including both the sexes in each group). The study concludes that although boys and girls both are exposed to unique socialization processes in each group, however, girls are the subject of greater pressure to be integrated and be popular. It was not that in both the groups girls used more standard pronunciation but they differ in their extreme usage of variable signaling their community

membership. That is, in one group women used the most standard pronunciation, while in the other group used the least standard pronunciation exhibiting their community membership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, studies of gender in relation to language have brought forward the importance of gender in language acquisition. Men and women acquire the appropriate linguistic attitudes and behaviours from the family and the society they have grown up in and are the part of, therefore, gender differences are a result of socialization, which play a vital role in language acquisition.

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