Sex Stereotypes as a Function of Genderlect

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Sex Stereotypes as a Function of Genderlect

by Michelle Goldberg

Abstract

The perceptions of women’s speech was investigated. Thirty six undergraduate students read one of three passages characteristic of male, female and neutral language, then rated the speakers on the following nine characteristics: impoliteness, confidence, status, intelligence, aggressiveness, unattractiveness, extroversion, power and gender. All students were uninformed of the true nature of the experiment for fear that they would give the socially acceptable answers until the end of the experiment. The results were found to be insignificant for a majority of the characteristics, except for the fact that women’s speech was rated significantly more polite and more feminine than male’s speech. However, a trend was found indicating that women are rated more negatively; they were rated less confident, less aggressive, and less powerful. Thus, it can be concluded that a negatively stereotyped attitude exists towards women today which may be the cause of gender inequality in our society. Since these inequalities are ingrained in language, they are extremely difficult to combat. The only solution is to keep people aware and committed to change in hope that things will get better. Sex Stereotypes as a Function of Genderlect. When we meet a person for the first time, our perceptions of that individual tend to be formed by what we see and hear. Since language reflects one’s social standing, self confidence, education etc..., it is constantly used in impression formation. From the way a person speaks, we thus make inferences about his or her character.

Although not consciously formed, many sex differences in language do exist. Numerous studies (Lakoff, 1990 and 1976; Haas, 1979; Rasmussen & Moely, 1986) have clearly demonstrated the differences between masculine and feminine genderlect. These differences could be what account for the different perceptions we hold of men and women. Lakoff, (1976) notes that “linguistic imbalances are worthy of study because they bring into sharper focus real world imbalances and inequities”. To study these imbalances Lakoff (1976 and 1990), noted eight linguistic categories that women and men use to a different degree, which show up in all levels of the grammar of English. She found differences in the choice and frequency of lexical items in the and in the situations in which certain syntactic rules are performed.

1. Certain colour words. Women make far more precise discriminations in naming colours than men; words such as beige, ecru, mauve, aquamarine, and lavender are present in woman’s active vocabulary, but absent from the vocabulary of most men. "Men find such description trivial, and irrelevant to the real world" (Lakoff, 1976).

2. "Empty" adjectives. There are a number of adjectives that are mainly confined to women’s speech. Lakoff states that women use words such as ‘adorable’, ‘charming’, ‘sweet’, ‘lovely’, and ‘divine’ more often than men do. She also states that there are neutral adjectives which are available to both sexes, such as ‘great’, ‘terrific’ and ‘neat’.

3. Expletives. Lakoff claims that the stronger swear words are used by men and weaker ones are reserved for women. An example of a strong expletive would be ‘sh*t’ as compared to ‘oh dear’ used by women.

4. Hedges. Women’s speech, in general, seems to contain more instances of ‘well’, ‘y’know’, and ‘kinda’. Terms such as ‘I guess’ or ‘I wonder’ are also used. These terms are used to convey uncertainty or used when one cannot vouch for the accuracy of their statement (Lakoff, 1976).

5. The intensive ‘so’. Although men can use the intensive ‘so’, its use is more characteristic of women’s speech. Men use ‘so’ in sentences that do not refer to themselves or that are unemotional in nature. Women, on the other hand, use ‘so’ instead of ‘very’ in sentences such as ‘I like him so much’ instead of ‘I like him very much’.

6. Tag questions. A tag is midway between an outright statement and a yes no
question... It is used when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of the claim" (Lakoff, 1976). An example is "It's a nice day, isn't it?" By adding the question part at the end of a declarative, it gives the impression that the speaker is not sure of themselves and "looks to the addressee for confirmation and even having no view of their own" (Lakoff, 1976).

7. Hyper correct speech. Women use more grammatically correct speech than males. Studies have been done which show that women will pronounce the full form of the ending "ing" for example 'singing' vs. the male form 'singin' (Fisher, as cited in Fasold, 1990). Another study found that men delete or reduce final consonant clusters that serve grammatical functions more often than women (Wolfram, as cited in Smith, 1985).

8. Polite forms. Women's speech is more polite than men's. They use please and thank you more often and make requests rather than making demands using the imperative form. For example, men will use the direct order 'Close the door' whereas women will use the compound request 'Won't you please close the door?' Lakoff (1976) states that by using he imperative, males make the assumption that they are superior to the addressee.

Lakoff goes on to state that women's language (language descriptive of women alone) "submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, on the one hand, and encourages expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it". The ultimate effect of these discrepancies, is that they contribute to various stereotypes that we have about the sexes and their roles in society.

Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz (1972), have noted the existence of sex-role stereotypes i.e., "consensual beliefs about the differing characteristics of men and women". It is known that groups invent stereotypes about other groups. The dominant group is the one that establishes the stereotypes of the other groups and decides which groups, on the basis of these stereotypes are 'good' and 'bad' (Lakoff, 1976). Broverman et. al. (1972) indicate that men and masculine characteristics are more highly valued in our society than women and feminine characteristics, "of the 41 items defined as stereotypic, 29 had the masculine pole chosen as more desirable by a majority of each sample. Moreover, the men and women showed a high agreement about which poles were socially desirable". They found that these male characteristics form a group of related behaviours which reflect a 'competency' cluster. Included in this cluster are attributes such as competence, assertion, logical, confident, and leadership ability. A relative absence of these traits characterizes the stereotypic perception of women.

Lao, Upchurch, Worwin, and Grossnicle, 1975, also found that negatively stereotyped views toward females are shared by both males and females. This supports past research (Mckee & Sherriffs, 1956; Sherriffs & Jarret, 1953) which found that males are seen as the high prestigious group, and this preference for males is seen on the part of both men and women. In this study by Lao et. al. (1975) it was found that "unfavourable attitudes towards females do exist". They looked at intelligence and likeability and concluded that since there is no concrete evidence that males are more intelligent than females (Maccoby, 1963; Wechsler 1958, as cited in Lao et. al.) the fact that subjects evaluated males as more intelligent is indicative of a biased attitude held towards females. The same reasoning was applied to the likeability variable.

A study by Seigler and Seigler (1976) also found that syntactic forms associated with males are rated more intelligent and those associated with females less so. They also comment on Goldberg's (1968) findings that students consistently rated published articles credited to women lower than the identical articles credited to men.

What do the differences between men and women's speech mean? Since the manner in which an individual speaks conveys information about the speaker, we would like to know how the predominant forms in women's speech are perceived. Thus, the purpose in the present experiment is to provide information about what these forms imply about women today. In doing so we attempt to determine the extent to which negative stereotypes still exist about women. Broverman et. al (1972), have noted that "these stereotypes are widely held, persistent, and highly traditional". We too believe that negative stereotypes, formed by language perception, are still prevalent in our society.

Subjects read passages typical of male, female and neutral speech and rated the speakers on a list of nine characteristics developed from the sex role literature and Lakoff's work. The characteristics are impolite, confident, status, intelligent, aggressive, unattractive, extrovert, power, and gender. These adjectives were chosen to test the hypothesis that women, speakers of women's language, should receive more negative ratings than men, speakers of men's language on these characteristics.

**Method Subjects**

Thirty-six undergraduate students from the
University of Western Ontario participated in our study. Their ages ranged from 18 - 22 with a mean age of 19.7 years. These students were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Group one was presented a passage typical to a woman's speech, group two received a paragraph typical of male's speech and the third group received a neutral language paragraph. Thus, each group consisted of twelve subjects, six females and six males with each subject receiving one passage and answering one questionnaire.

Materials

Three passages were used: one was characteristic of women's speech, one male's speech, and one neutral speech (see Appendix A). The passages were very short containing from seven to nine lines each. They were controlled for topic and length and hence only differed on the vocabulary Lakoff indicated as differentially used by males and females. For example, a sentence in the female passage read 'I drove so quickly to get here on time'. Whereas the male corresponding sentence is 'Shit. I drove like hell to get here' and the neutral sentence read 'Boy. I drove faster than usual to make it here'.

The passages were created by inserting as many of Lakoff's characteristics into each passage. Thus, the female passage contained color words 'turquoise', tag questions 'haven't I?', the intensive 'so' and hedges such as 'y'know', it was also more grammatically correct and more polite. To be sure the passages were typical to each gender, 15 subjects were asked to read the passages and judge if they thought it was a male or female. All 15 judged the gender of the speaker correctly.

Questionnaires were prepared on which the subjects were to rate the speakers in the previous passages (See Appendix B). A 7-point Likert scale was used where the subject was to put an 'X' on the line closest to the characteristic they believed the speaker to hold.

Procedure

The subjects were approached on campus (in the library, Center spot or the Social science building) and asked if they had a few minutes to answer a questionnaire. Each subject was presented randomly with one of the types of passages. They were asked to read the presented passage and to then rate the speakers on the following characteristics. The subjects signed consent forms (See Appendix C) however, they were not told the true nature of the experiment until they were debriefed after the experiment (See Appendix D). This was done for fear that they would answer the questionnaire with the socially acceptable answers instead of with their true feelings, had they been told the study was about stereotypes. The questionnaire took approximately 5 minutes to complete.

Results

We can see that on Status, Intelligence, and extroversion, there were no differences between the groups. However, with impolite, confidence, aggressiveness, unattractiveness, power, and gender we notice a trend where the female speaker was rated lower on all these items as compared to the male speaker. Note that low scores indicate less of the characteristic, hence a low score on impolite indicates more polite, and a low score on confidence means low confidence.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation scores as a function of characteristics and the gender of the passage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonpolite</td>
<td>4.385</td>
<td>3.333</td>
<td>2.583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.805)</td>
<td>(1.731)</td>
<td>(0.996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>4.154</td>
<td>3.833</td>
<td>5.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.573)</td>
<td>(1.697)</td>
<td>(1.371)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>4.538</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.506)</td>
<td>(1.446)</td>
<td>(1.371)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressiveness</td>
<td>4.923</td>
<td>4.167</td>
<td>4.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.553)</td>
<td>(1.801)</td>
<td>(0.937)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonattractiveness</td>
<td>3.769</td>
<td>3.250</td>
<td>3.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.481)</td>
<td>(1.055)</td>
<td>(1.155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extroversion</td>
<td>5.538</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.45)</td>
<td>(1.0)</td>
<td>(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>3.923</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>5.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.553)</td>
<td>(1.215)</td>
<td>(1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>5.462</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.33)</td>
<td>(1.732)</td>
<td>(1.782)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.291)</td>
<td>(1.758)</td>
<td>(0.835)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations appear in parentheses. The group size for male and female equals 12.

An analysis of variance was performed on the data. A insignificant main effect for the language of the passage was found, however a significant main effect for the characteristics was found \( F(8, 272) = 8.10, p < .001 \) and a significant interaction effect was found between language of
passage and the characteristics $F(8, 272) = 2.13, p < .01$. Thus, the subjects' ratings depended on the passage they received.

In order to determine which characteristics differed significantly a post hoc analysis was performed using the Newman Keuls procedure and an alpha level of .05. The nature of the interaction was examined by holding the characteristic of the passage constant and comparing the passages at the following characteristics: Impolite, confidence, aggression, power, and gender. For a graphical representation of the means.

Using a pooled error term interesting results were found. The only characteristic that showed no significant results was aggression. For gender, the male passage differed significantly from the female passage ($q(3, 272) = 4.917, p < .05$), and the female passage almost differed from the neutral passage, whereas the male and neutral passages did not differ significantly from each other. On the politeness variable the male and neutral passage differed significantly ($q(3, 272) = 4.516, p < .05$), the male and female passage almost did as well ($q(2, 272) = 2.637, p < .05$). On the confidence and power variables, both the male and female passages differed significantly from the neutral passage.

Discussion

The present experiment investigated the perceptions of women's speech characteristics, and attempted to determine the extent to which negative stereotypes exist about women today. Previous studies have noted that "unfavourable attitudes towards females do exist" (Lao et al., 1975), however the present study failed to replicate these studies with significant results. The only characteristics that were found to be statistically significant were two: First that women's speech was rated more feminine and second, it was rated more polite than male's speech. However, a trend was noticed, it was found that women were rated more negatively; they were rated as less confident, less aggressive, unattractive and less powerful. However, I could not replicate Seigler and Seigler (1976) and Lao et al. (1975) who found that women were rated as less intelligent than males.

There are many explanations as to why these results could not be replicated. Firstly the sample size: due to time constraints only 36 subjects were used compared to previous studies that used use as many 643 subjects (Lao et al., 1975). As well, the male and female subjects' responses were not separated. It was assumed that since previous studies found both men and women to hold these negative stereotypes toward women (Broverman et al., 1972; Lao et al. 1975) it was not necessary to separate their responses. This should have, however, been done to see if past research on this aspect could have been replicated and thus that indeed women do have a prejudice against their own sex. As well, although we tried to control for the good subject effect, by not telling the subjects about the true nature of the experiment until the end, they could still have been able to figure it out and answer with the socially acceptable answer. By asking subjects directly how they feel about linguistic forms, this caused them to be self conscious about them. Thus, the subjects wanted to say the right thing, especially today when the awareness of negative gender stereotypes towards women is heightened.

Seigler and Seigler (1976), comment that recently reported "changes in attitudes" toward women (Baruch, as cited in Seigler & Seigler, 1976) may have been more a function of changes in the social desirability of expressing anti-feminist prejudices than of real changes in attitudes. Thus, they used a matched groups design, where one group judged the intelligence of statements and the other judged the sex of the speaker, in effect reducing social pressure. If this design had been used the subjects attitudes probably would have been more validly reflected. Further evidence of a response bias lies in the fact that the majority of our scores were found to fall around the mean. The subjects probably did not want to give a true score, but preferred to have no extreme opinion. Further research should be done with matched groups having one group evaluate the passage and the other indicate the gender.

Another methodological problem could lie in the fact that written speech samples were used. The subjects received part of a conversation of which they were only able to 'hear' one speaker. Other research has been done using written stories (Rasmussen & Moley 1986) and sentences (Seigler & Seigler, 1976), however these have been criticized in that language differences between the sexes occur in spoken informal style. Lakoff (1976) mentioned that speech materials need reference to real world context "they are a complex and subtle combination of judgments that would be virtually impossible to reproduce in a natural way in an experimental situation". These materials then, since they are not part of connected dialogue and are unrelated to context, could be the cause of differential findings. I could not decide upon another method of testing for female stereotypes, without using written samples, for in my opinion auditory samples (video or cassette recordings) would create a bias since the voices are heard as definitely male or female. Further research needs to be done to develop a better methodology to test for the presence of attitudes.

Another problem could be in the fact that these passages were not actual speech samples. They were fabricated to be typical of male, female and neutral speech for the study. Perhaps had I transcribed actual conversations more influential
results could have been found.

The trend that was found has some serious implications. The fact that women are rated negatively on confidence, aggressiveness and power, can explain the differences in the inequalities in the work force. Since these characteristics are the ones that are valued for some occupations, opportunities that require such traits may be seriously limited for females. As well, when we consider that these results were found with liberal, young educated university students these results are more disturbing for two reasons. First, these are the people who are usually more open minded and more sympathetic toward the goal of gender equality. If these people rate women as more negatively than men, then similar stronger attitudes must be held by the majority of society. Second, these are the people who will fill the key positions in the future. The fact that they hold these biased attitudes toward women certainly does not show that women are well on their way of achieving gender equality, these attitudes show no hope of being erased. Consider the fact that these stereotypes appear to be unconscious. Ask any one of these individuals and they all claim to be for women's equality. Because they do not realize they hold such attitudes these stereotypes are even more difficult to combat.

However there is no quick, clear cut solution. Even though women are seen in a negative light, they may be seen in an even worse light when they take on traditionally male sex role appropriate behaviours. They are in what some authors call a double bind, the damned if you do, dammed if you don't phenomenon (Lakoff, 1976; Lao et al. 1975; Rasmussen & Moely 1986). These researchers have found that women, acting in an inappropriate sex-role manner, such as being highly assertive, were evaluated as even less intelligent and even less likable (Lao et al., 1975). Rasmussen and Moley (1986) even found that women were rated as uppity when they acted in male sex roles.

As long as gender inequalities exist, women will be in a double bind communicatively: any way they differ from men they will be rated negatively and any way they act to approximate men they will be rated as unfeminine and uppity. The ideal would be for both sexes to move their ways of communicating closer to some middle ground. However, this is only an ideal and would never work. Partly because men will have little to be gained by compromise and mostly because it is debatable whether a compromise even exists. Is there really a compromise between aggressive and submissive? Society's only hope is to make individuals aware of the differences between men's and women's language and alert people that they need to remedy them. "We may not all be ready or able to undertake the deep and sincere changes of attitude that are prerequisite to change in behaviour; that will take a long time" (Lakoff, 1990). However, if people are kept aware and committed, things are likely to get better.

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