



## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND GENDER: A CASE STUDY IN VIETNAMESE

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### Abstract

Gender and language have become an interesting topic on which some linguists have done research to find out the relationship between them. Some of studies focus on the differences between language that is spoken by men and women in terms of phonology, syntax, and lexicon and conversation analysis. While the other studies have investigated the influence of gender-based differences on establishing and maintaining the imbalance power between the two genders. This paper will attempt to find out the relationship between gender and language and mentions briefly the main sociolinguistic approaches used in the study of gender and language. Besides that, the paper is going to discuss the impact of language on reproducing and reflecting social difference. Some aspects related to this issue including attitudes and prestige, communities of practice, conversational styles and strategies are also taken into consideration. In addition, a case study in Vietnamese is also mentioned to clarify the relationship between language and gender, followed by some implications for language planning at the end.

**Keywords:** gender, language, sociolinguistic approaches, language planning.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Theoretical Aspects

There have been some discussions on the sociolinguistic approaches applied in the study of gender and language so far. According to Coates (1988), the research on language and gender is divided into studies that focus on dominance and those which concentrate on difference in language features of men and women. Additionally, El-daly (2011) mentioned three major themes that dominate the language and gender research from 1973 to the end of the twentieth century (p.65). The person who first pioneered in this field was Lakoff (1973) whose work confirmed that women's speech had some features that were different from men's speech. Women have tendency to use forms which help them express uncertainty related to what they are talking about. In Lakoff's view, some of language aspects consisting of lexical distinctions, tag questions, and strength of directive speech acts, strong versus weak expletives, question intonation with statement syntax are more associated with women than with men. Women using these features are considered to be not only weak but also inferior and powerless. Lakoff (1975, as cited in Wardhaugh, 2010) suggested that the discussion of 'Women's language' is related to 'men's language'. Male speech is the unmarked standard form and it sets the benchmark whereas female speech was considered to be a marked form. Therefore, female's language is thought to be less powerful. However, Lakoff's approach is referred to as 'deficit' theory (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 347) since her analysis was not centered on empirical research and her finding assured that women's speech had uncertainty and lack of confidence on the part of women (Holmes 1992, p. 313).

The other commonly known approach is the 'dominance', which theorizes that male speech is dominant over the subordinate female speech since men are likely to use what power they have to dominate women, so language is one of the powerful tool which allows men to express their status of supremacy. In other words, men are considered to have the great role in establishing the social norms, which causes the inequality in the behavior and treatment between men and women. Although the dominance approach does not come to the final conclusion that female speech is not accepted, it reflects the dominant position of man in society through their interaction with women.

By contrast, not focusing on the perception of the power and dominance of male language, the 'different approach' explained that male and female born in different culture learn how to communicate and set the rules of socializing in different ways, which has accompanied with them during their lifetime. Talbot (1998, p. 131 as cited in Shiel, 2001, p. 4) stated 'the different model depends on a 'two cultures' account of male and female socialization.' Maltz and Borker (1982) showed the different language features of men and women and they suggested that these norms were achieved in same-sex groups. Thus, this matter cannot be referred to social inequality. Yet, it is (sub-) cultural miscommunication. The research focused on different areas of differentiation between conversational style of men and that of women. For example, conversational style of men is competitive whereas that one of women seems to be cooperative. Moreover, Wardhaugh (2010) claims that women have tendency to use more compliments and polite forms than men. Also, he stated that "women prefer to avoid 'masculine', 'authoritative' and 'powerful' ways of speaking" (p. 343). Having the similar findings, Tennen (1990) figures out that men feel more comfortable than women when they are talking in public. However, women just feel more comfortable than men when they are in private settings.

Although being accepted widely, the dominance approach and different approach have received much criticism. Some problems related to the different approach are recognized by many researchers. Cameron (2007) argued that although different approach makes an effort to focus on contextual differences rather than power in order to eliminate the notion of the fact that male speech is superior to female speech, relative two-way dominance also exists in these differences.. Although, it is clear that not only male but also female are able to adopt and adjust to other's way of

communication (Talbot, 1998 as cited in Shiel, 2001), the difference approach confirms each gender has a fixed and unique style. Moreover, the approach had no evidence to give an explanation why men and women should belong to two different sub-cultures (Johnson, 1997). Meanwhile, Talbot (1998, as cited in Shiel, 2001) said that the dominance approach was criticized for implying the 'blanket conception' of male dominance. It would be a mistake when it is said that all men dominate all women as there are also exceptions in this case.

Another approach used in the study of gender language is the social constructionist approach. It is said that culture is the combination of value of material and spirit created by humans during a long period of history. Thus, language is one part of culture and it is also maintained by culture. In other words, speech features are associated with social constructs. In order to make this principle understood, it is necessary to consider the concept of Communities of Practice introduced by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998, p. 490 in Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 348-349):

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, value, power relations – in short, practice in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor. A community of practice is different as a social constructs from the traditional notion of community, primary because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.

According to this concept, groups of people sharing the tasks or duties build up communities. When these communities are set up and developed, language features and norms are also formed and maintained then. In other words, the Concept of Practice offers both the framework and means on which researcher can base to find out the process during which individuals become community members and how they get language competence. Thus, the concept of Communities of Practice is more suitable with social constructionist approach compared to other concepts. Cameron (1992) confirms that it stimulates a different focus, a new focus on the difference gender makes not on gender differences. Moreover, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992, p. 466 cited in Homes & Meyerhoff, 1999, p.180) note that linguistic researchers could have good and useful results if they look into "people's active engagement in the reproduction of or resistance to gender arrangements in their communities." From the above reasons, the Community of Practice can benefit those who are attempting to find out the relationship between language, community and gender.

Besides that, conversational styles and speech patterns are also explored by modern approach whose findings are quite welcomed at the current time in the specific contexts. In the conversation, women are more likely to use more standard, polite forms and compliments than men, so they try to build up the solidarity with their interlocutors (Wardhaugh, 2010, p.343). He adds more that men 'talk to get things done' (p.343). Also, men use questions as a strategy to request information, while women use them to maintain the conversation or build up the conversational participation. Fishman (1980, 1983) assures that men have more control in cross-sex conversations than women. Moreover, Robin Lakoff (1975) claims men are less asked questions but they use more vernacular forms than women in communicating. Men are likely to be more successful than women in terms of topic selection and development. Some things related to minimal responses like 'yeah' and 'uhm', which are used with different purposes by men and women. Men use them to show the agreement, whereas women use such responses to set up the collaborative discourse. According to Zimmerman and West (1977), men in mixed conversation have a lot of interruption compared to women, and falling silent in the conversation is referred to women.

There are some reasons why women's linguistic behavior is different from men's are discussed in details by Holmes (1992). The first explanation belongs to the social status. More standard speech forms are used by women as they are more status conscious than men (p. 171). High social status is linked to standards speech forms, thus using more standard linguistic features is a mean which helps women acquire such status in society. It is said that women without paid employment are more capable of using this form as they cannot be respected by people around when having no job, which also means that women with well- paid job will use fewer standard forms. Yet, there is not much evidence to support this idea. Actually, Holmes mentions one study carried out in America with the result showing that women at home are more associated with non-standard forms in comparison with those at work whose jobs are nurses, doctors. So, the social status explanation is not widely accepted. The second explanation concerning with this issue is 'woman's role as guardian of society's values' (p. 172), which means that society expects better and more standard behavior from women. That is also the reason why the young boy with misbehavior is easily tolerated than the girl. In addition, little girls are allowed less freedom than little boys. In each community, women are considered to have a role of modeling correct behavior so that they have the best influence on their children in term of daily communication. Therefore, women are expected to speak more correctly and standardly than men. The third explanation is that women should not get exposure to vernaculars in order to not only save their 'faces' but also save their husbands' 'faces'.

## 1.2 Sexist language and linguistic discrimination

Sexist language and linguistic discrimination are other two aspects which are about to be discussed in this paper. Holmes (1992) argues that attitudes are expressed through language and he claims 'sexist attitudes stereotype a person according to gender rather than judging on individual merits' (p. 336). In other words, stereotypes attitudes towards men and women are encoded by sexist language. Feminists say that English is a gender-biased language. This perception has supported with many evidences in the real life. Women are addressed with three titles including "Miss", "Mrs." and "Ms." to show their marital status and sex, whereas men are just associated with only title that signifies their sex: "Mr." Some other examples regarding the gender-biased phenomenon can be not only seen in English sex-paired words, 'waiter/waitress', 'usher/usherette'. Also, when hearing the word 'nurse', most people have the image of a woman in their mind not a man. The addition of suffix and affix to the words considered as marked forms to signal 'femaleness' expresses the notion that women are not important, not serious, inferior and deviant. There is an explanation why these gendered language varieties come into existence. That is these varieties could be born and existed in single-sex communities of practice in the past and it shaped people's perception which could not be easy to change. For instance, in

some communities some hard and better activities used to be reserved for men, while easy and inferior ones for women. As a result, this perception formed individual identity or group identity through language use. Eventually, the notion has lasted for ages. What is more, using 'generic' *he* and *man* to refer to male human being or third person singular pronoun clearly denies women's presence. Clearly, all of the above examples not only confirm language is sexist but also convey the discriminatory attitudes towards gender. People are treated differently base on what kind of language they use. It is said that if standard language is associated with one gender, this gender will be highly valued and are respected than the other. In other words, speakers are assumed to have high educational background, occupational status and social status if they use standard variety (Holmes, 1992, p. 348), which contributes to creating inequality in society. Therefore, something needs doing to change people's perception and attitude, otherwise new generation continue to have the same perception and attitude as the previous generation have. Wardaugh (2010, p. 354) suggests that less sexist practices will happen if less sexist child-rearing practice and role differentiation are less sexist. However, he raised an idea "it may be utopian to believe that language use will ever become 'neutral'. Humans use everything around them - and language is just a thing in that sense - to create differences among themselves." (p.354)

## 2. Case study- Gendered language in Vietnamese

### 2.1 In social life

In social life, when hearing some jobs like 'bác sĩ' (doctor), 'kỹ sư' (engineer), many people refer them to male rather than female. In order to confirm these jobs done by female, the word 'nữ' (woman) is added to be 'nữ bác sĩ', 'nữ kỹ sư'.

When stuck in traffic jam, Vietnamese people often ask: 'Các anh cảnh sát đâu rồi?' (Where are you, policeman?). In this case they do not say 'policewoman' or 'police officer'

'Cậu đi chơi với bọn này nhé?' (Would you like to hang out with me?) 'Cậu' in Vietnamese indicates male. But in the north of Vietnam, people use for both.

Similarly, Vietnamese students have a tendency to translate 'you' in English into 'ông' or 'anh' (refer to man), no one uses 'cô' or 'chị' (refer to women)

In Vietnamese culture, order is an important issue. For example, when having a meal, the men or powerful person will start to eat first. This phenomenon influences the language. Some compound nouns 'ông bà' (grandfather-grandmother), 'anh chị' (brother-sister), 'chú gì' (uncle-aunt). In this case, male particles stand before female particles.

To start the meeting or conference, spokesman greets: 'Thưa các ông các bà' or 'Thưa các anh các chị', but English will be 'Hello *ladies* and *gentlemen*'

In addition, after getting married, women are usually called by their husbands' names: 'Chị Phát đi đâu thế?' Where are you going, Mrs Phát ? Phát is her husband's name.

Young boys are usually named with strong and successful names like : Dũng, Cường , Thành Đạt. (bravery, success). Meanwhile, some gentle and flower names for young girls : Lan, Mai, Cúc, Hồng (orchid, rose...).

Gendered language consists of forms referring to this gender better than the other. 'như con trai' (just like a boy) is more positive than 'như con gái' (just like a girl)

'Thôi, anh chấp làm gì, đàn bà ấy mà...' (keep calm, just like a woman) or 'Đàn ông có khác.' (just like a man)

Words used to describe men and women are also different. Some words used to describe men: mạnh mẽ (strong), độc lập (independent). Whereas, some words used to describe women: yếu điệu, thướt tha, dịu hiền, đanh đá. (gentle, charming, shrewish)

### 2.2 In Vietnamese literature

In Vietnamese literature, morphology and vocabulary for men show that they are more powerful, stronger and better than women.

*Appearance:*

Female

Hoa tươi trong độ gió đông, Gái xinh đến có chồng thời thời;  
Flowers are fresh due to Eastern wind, a girl remains nice until marrying  
Đàn bà như cành hoa tươi, Nở ra chỉ được một thời mà thôi.  
Women are like fresh flowers, they bloom in the short time

Male

Đàn ông miệng rộng thì sang,  
A man with wide mouth is royal  
Đàn bà rộng miệng tan hoang cửa nhà;  
A women with wide mouth is really talkative

### Responsibilities and duties

Women have less important duties than men. They are expressed clearly in literature

Women have these duties:

Childbearing : Đàn ông chiến tranh, đàn bà sanh đẻ ( men are in charge of fighting in the war, women are in charge of childbearing)

Child-rearing: Con hư tại mẹ, cháu hư tại bà (Mother's darlings are but milksop heroes)

Domesticity: Vắng đàn ông quanh nhà, vắng đàn bà quanh bếp (without men, the house becomes empty; without women, the kitchen becomes empty).

Men have these duties:

Rearing children: Cha nào con nấy (Like father, like son), Mẹ đánh một trăm không bằng cha ngăm một tiếng. (Children are scared as father shout at them).

Training and cultivating spirit: Làm trai mà chẳng biết suy nghĩ, đến khi nghĩ lại còn gì là xuân,  
(If you are a man, you must know how to think carefully). Đi cho biết đó biết đây, ở nhà với mẹ biết ngày nào khôn.  
(Youth must have its fling).

### Career perception

In the past, most women were farmers working on the paddies: Làm ruộng hỏi đàn bà, làm nhà hỏi đàn ông. (Ask women for paddy experience, ask men for building experience).

Besides that, they were able to sew clothes: Gái khéo vá vai, trai tài phủ nóc. (Skilled women sew clothes, talented men build house).

Men were supposed to earn money to support their families: Đàn ông làm ra đàn bà cất lại (Men make money, Women keep it).

### 3. The implication for language learning

This brings us to another issue, that is, language planning should take sexist language and linguistic discrimination into consideration. According to Weinstein (1980, p. 56 cited in Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 378), “language planning is a government authorized, long-term, sustained, and conscious effort to alter a language’s function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems.” Wardhaugh (2010) says there are two ways in language planning: status planning and corpus planning. Status planning tries to acquire status of a variety of a language or a language and help speakers of that language get the rights. Corpus planning enhances and standardizes a variety of a language or a language. Language is a means of communication through which people express their attitude and behavior. Therefore, if language planners attempt to make any changes in language positively, they will make people change their thought and perception. Pauwels (1998 cited in Rash, 2012) claims that the status of deviant groups can be improved if harmful gender bias are get rid of from language. Also, nonsexist language contributes to creating the equality between men and women. As a result, sexist attitudes and sex discrimination can be eliminated gradually or at least can be reduced positively

### 4. Conclusion

This paper has just covered some main sociolinguistic approaches from 1973 to the end of the twentieth century. In general, these approaches take turn to make the contribution to explaining the relationship between gender and language and somehow describe the differences of language spoken to and produced by men and women. Additionally, the society’s perceptions and stereotypes are reflected through the language associated with men and women, and in the ways both sexes use language. Sexist language and language discrimination are the important issues that exist in every language and need to be solved so that society’s sexist attitudes can be changed, which leads to the fact that men and women are treated equally in language and in all fields of society. Through many studies, power in gender language has been proven to be present in language. English and Vietnamese are two languages with different features related to cultures, people. However, these two languages have some similarities in the relationship between gender and language, especially the issues of power in gendered language. In Vietnamese society nowadays, men and women are equal. Therefore they have a right to make language less sexist. Yet, according to Wardhaugh (2010, p.354), “it may be utopian to believe that language use will ever become ‘neutral’. Humans use everything around them - and language is just a thing in that sense – to create differences among themselves.”

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