



**Man and Woman Talk:
Grammatical and Syntactical Similarities and Disparities**

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**W.P. No.2007-06-03
June 2007**

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Man and Woman Talk: Grammatical and Syntactical Similarities and Disparities

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Abstract

Multiple research studies on grammar and syntax used by men and women stress disparities stemming from gender specific styles of “talk”. Borrowing from the existing literature, we analyzed transcripts of 107 employees in an Indian organization to study variations, if any, in grammar and syntax across genders at the middle management level.

Our study was based on an analysis of reported speech of a critical incident of upward influence in the organization. We classified the transcripts into two clusters, viz., male and female. A frequency count for some grammatical and syntactical forms was taken.

Frequency count of the grammatical forms revealed no significant disparity in language used by males and females in same and mixed sex groups. The reasons for this finding are as follows:

- 1. Use of language is not gender specific. More specifically, sentential constructs are not governed by gender.*
- 2. The content and context, if similar, yield similar results.*
- 3. Evolution of a language pattern that is “organizationally fit” rather than gender governed.*

Significant variations in use of tags and hedges were identified. Based on the above findings, we attribute the variations in syntactical forms to aspects other than those related to “male” or “female” concepts of style, proposed by earlier researchers – for a study of the concept of style will require a framework which studies the linguistic form and the social functions in sync.

Man and Woman Talk: Grammatical and Syntactical Similarities and Disparities

Introduction

In this paper we study parts of sentential construct and syntax used by men and women in narratives involving interaction with members of same and mixed sex teams. We argue that the differences in language use, cited by researchers (Lakoff 1975) cannot, in today's context, more specifically in Indian organizational context, be attributed to the biological sex of an individual. The same, we can hypothesize, will hold true for studies on gender and language across the globe.

As the message, composed of various sentential constructs and syntactical clauses, within the organizational setup, indexes task orientation and membership within a group/team, the structuring is prudent, goal-centric and situation specific. Hence variations, if identified, need to be studied and accounted for within the organizational context and culture.

Last four decades have witnessed a surge of women entering the corporate arena. While structural changes in rules and policies are still in the process of implementation, communication styles in groups and teams have undergone major changes.

Literature reveals that men and women employ a different style of communicating their messages to members in either same or mixed sex teams. Researchers posit that women use soft and polite expressions, vague adjectives (Crawford 1995), question forms and hedges (Lakoff 1975) in their daily lives. Clearly the attempt, according to researchers, is to strengthen bonds with co-workers or team leaders and avoid using words or phrases that sound unfriendly or inappropriate. On the other hand, men have been credited with using impersonal language and topics (Holmes 1992) to sound authoritative in interactions with team members and co-workers.

Language use across genders varies with individuals and across organizations and can best be studied in a particular context/ situation. Researchers (Aries 1998) found that the style of the sender, be it man or woman (Krauss and Chiu 1998) would confirm to the

situation or the context in which it was being used. Both power or status of the sender and receiver are important in the encoding of the message in a linguistically appropriate format (Holtgraves 2002).

In the Indian context we are not aware of any work on gender, grammatical and syntactical constructs used/avoided in the organizational context. Our objective, in this paper, is to study linguistic styles used in narratives on critical incidents within the organization. We have restricted choice of the context/situation to the narration of a critical incident on upward influence.

Subsequently we have studied the frequency of use of pronouns, adverbs, verbs, conjunctions, prepositions and hedges and tag questions used by men and women to influence their team leader.

We argue in this paper that differences in linguistic styles of men and women can be a function of the nature of dialogue and the task for which the interaction commenced. Additionally it can also be a result of the social roles within and outside the organization. Hence, the analysis of the linguistic styles which began as an investigation of the differences in the language used across genders, ended on a broader approach to individual variations and commitment to varying social roles.

Literature Review

Much research has been done in the broad area of language and gender to explore the role of social context on speeches of men and women (Holmes 1997; Thomson, Murachver & Green 2001) as well as the impact of women's role and status on language (Sundgren 2001; James 1996; Pooley 2003; Eckert 1989; Romaine, 1996). Motives, concerns and requirements of the sender have been found to be the pivotal factors determining choice and use of words and phrases.

Previous research proposes that emotional, gentle, sympathetic choice of words is a specific linguistic trait adopted by women (Briton & Hall 1995; Carli 1990; Hay 2000; Mulac 1998), while men use forceful language which if emotional, is mostly negative (Mulac 1998).

Seven out of the 14 language variables which demonstrate effects consistent with ‘Gender-Linked Language Effect’, according to Mulac and Lundell (1986), are characteristic of male speakers: impersonals, fillers, elliptical sentences, units, justifiers, geographical references, and spatial references. The remaining seven that is, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns, negations, verbs of cognition, dependent clauses with subordinating conjunctions understood, oppositions, and pauses were typical of the female population..

According to Tannen (1990) women and men belong to different sociolinguistic subcultures, with men’s internalized linguistic style more “competitive and results oriented”, and women’s more “relational and rapport oriented”. Much later, but in sync with the findings of Tannen, Mulac, Seibold, and Farris (2000) argued that the language features more indicative of men were number of words, negations, questions, judgmental adjectives, references to emotion, and oppositions while those more predictive of women were intensive adverbs, longer mean length sentences, hedges, directives, dependent clauses, and sentence initial adverbials.

While a majority of the findings, by previous researchers, point towards a difference in linguistic style, there have also been contradictory results postulated. For instance, Brownlow’s (2003) findings state that in the use of language there is no difference in the presentation of affectual or emotional processes between men and women. The polite and powerless speech style generally associated with women was contradicted in the findings of Brownlow (2003).

Interestingly when we began an examination of the linguistic styles of men and women, we found that variations and similarities get reflected in grammatical forms as pronouns, adverbs, verbs, conjunctions and prepositions and syntax as tag questions and hedges.

Grammatical Forms

Differences have been cited by researchers in the varying use of parts of speech by men and women. Apparently not all parts of speech have been explored by researchers. Most literature revolves round those parts in which a difference has been found. For the purpose of this study we have borrowed from the existing research on pronouns, verbs

and adverbs and have proceeded beyond to study the use of prepositions and conjunctions.

Pronouns

Simplicity in use of language has been found to be a characteristic feature of the linguistic style of women. Women use more “first person references in pre-statement clauses” which sound like hedges and some phrases like “and stuff”, “and things like that”, and “you know” (Crosby and Nyquist 1977, and Precht 2002).

As the language of women has been found to be collaborative, they tend to personalize, using more of personal pronouns like, “I”, “you”, “she”, “her”, “their”, “myself”, “yourself” and “herself” (Woods 2003, and Brownlow 2003). Argamon, Koppel, Fine, Shimoni and Brownlow (2003) postulate that female writers use more features associated with “involvedness”, such as first (e.g., I think) and second person pronouns. As men’s language is more competition oriented they tend to use first-person singular pronouns far less often than women (Mulac 1998: Pennebaker et al. 2003), which “produces a distanced, passive, objective style that men employ because they choose to--or perhaps because it is expected of them” (Brownlow 2003). Additionally, males favour impersonal pronouns, such as “it”, “this”, “that”, “these”, “those” and “they”.

Verbs and Adverbs

Mulac, Bradac, and Gibbons (2001) referred to male directives as direct and female uncertainty verbs indirect: male language features were rated as “more direct, succinct, personal, and instrumental”, whereas nine of the 10 female features were perceived as “more indirect, elaborate, and affective”. The findings demonstrate that “gender preferences for language use function in ways that are consistent with stylistic preferences that distinguish national cultures”.

Adverbs, argue Mulac, Seibold, and Farris (2000) are used more intensively by women than by men. We are not aware of literature which demonstrates variations/similarities in the frequency of use of adverbs between men and women. The same holds true for conjunctions and prepositions.

Much of the literature dealing with grammatical forms used by men and women points towards differences in frequency of use or avoidance. The “power laden” and “powerless” talk stemming from needs of men and women to gain credibility and acceptance in the social context have been primarily accounted for as reasons for the differences.

Proposition 1: Use/ avoidance of specific parts of speech (pronouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions) is a characteristic feature of man/woman talk.

Syntactical Forms

Tag questions and hedges have been frequently found in the speeches of women which, researchers (Biber, Conrad, Leech, 2002) argue are a byproduct of tactics used for politeness and nature of speech, often referred to as “powerless”.

Tags

Tags are words or phrases positioned at different points in a sentence, which have no meaning when studied in isolation, but add to the drag effect of the sentence. Some common examples are “aren’t you”, “isn’t it”. Positioning of tags within a sentence can change the emphasis of the utterance. For instance, if tags are positioned at the close of the sentence, they do connote a need to engage the other in interaction. Women have been found to use question forms (McMillan *et al.* 1977; Fishman 1980; Holmes 1982b) which may be consistent with the fact that their concern focuses more on building social and professional relationships. Attempt at prolonging the discussion is the reason attributed for placement of the tags at the end of the sentence. As women want to collaborate and develop relationship, the style stereotypically associated with females is characterized as “a combination of deference and camaraderie” while the “ideal” male style as “a combination of the distance and clarity strategies” (Lakoff, 1975).

Hedging

Lakoff (1973,1975) argued that hedges were used more frequently by women and were characteristic of “woman’s language” as they indicated lack of confidence, social

insecurity and a desire for use of polite forms (Shimanoff 1977; Brown and Levinson 1987).

Cheshire (2005) illustrated some “metacomments” used by adolescent girls while giving replies, such as, “I know that sounds a bit strange”: The boys, however, did not make use of similar “metacomments”. Boys, Cheshire (2005) notes were more concerned with referential meanings, while girls focused on the affective component of the discourse, which meant that their focus on the information status was much less than the boys.

Tags and hedges, mostly associated with politeness are differentially present in the speech patterns of men and women.

Proposition 2: Differences in linguistic styles of men and women are, among other variants, a byproduct of tag questions and hedges.

Methodology

The corpus we analyzed was compiled for a research project on Gender, Affect and Upward Influence (Kaul, Ansari and Rai 2006) and Gender Differences in the use of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) when Reporting Incidents of Upward Influence (UI): An Indian Study (Kaul and Patnaik 2006). Participants (109) for the study were from an Indian bank in west India. 22 of the participants were women and 87 were men. All of them worked in managerial positions and their work experience ranged from one to six and half years with this particular organization.

The first author asked the respondents to narrate a critical incident in which they had influenced their team leader. In this one-to-one interaction some of the variables were kept constant: the location for the interview was the same for all the participants, the same interviewer interacted with all the participants and the same set of questions were asked. The questions focused on the background information of the participants, name of their team leader, incident and the outcome – whether it was compliance or resistance.

While all the three studies focus on gender differences, the focal point of research and discussion is not the same. In the first project, while studying the relationship between gender and UI, affect was used as a moderator, in the second, we studied the role of FTAs

in reported incidents of Upward Influence across genders. In this particular study our focus is on finding if there are any differences in the linguistic styles of men and women.

The first author recorded the incidents. The overall duration of each tape was between 25 – 30 minutes. Transcripts for the same were prepared and each transcript was marked either M or F (Male or Female). We assigned a number to each transcript so that we could revert to the text for reference.

The second author manually counted the number of pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, verbs, adverbs, and hedges and tags used by both men and women. The frequency of occurrence was noted and mean for the same was taken.

Scope of the Study

We conducted the study on language use by men and women in one Indian organization with a ratio of 60 : 40 with the aim of studying the difference, if any, in the structuring of language within the organizational context.

While the issues discussed by men and women were similar, we expected the differences/similarities to surface in the narration of the incidents. The social context, role, position within the organization were not studied, though an attempt was made to restrict the analysis to employees in the managerial cadre.

Though the organization has a good ratio of men to women, the western zonal office in which the study was conducted has a skewed sex ratio with 22 women and 87 men. Hence, narration of a critical incident of upward influence in which the employee made attempts to gain compliance was not of much significance. Extension of the study to other offices of the same organization or different organizations may have yielded different results.

Analysis

The 109 transcripts were divided into two categories: Male and female. Each transcript within the two categories was assigned a number for ease of reference at a later date. Initially the count on parts of speech: pronouns, adverbs, verbs, conjunctions and

prepositions was taken, which was followed by a second round in which the frequency for the two syntactical forms, namely, tags and hedges was taken.

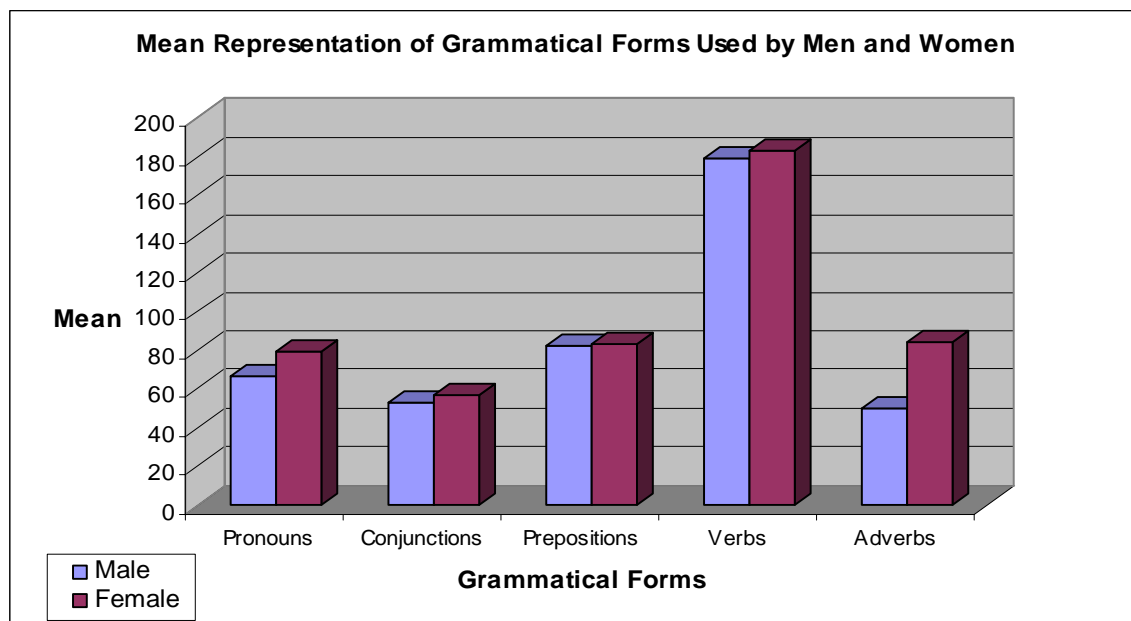
The analysis was done in two parts. One, variations if any, in the use of grammatical forms (Table 1) was studied and two, differences if any, in the use of syntactical forms (Table 2) were analyzed.

All respondents belonged to the same organization and were working at the same level, narrating a critical incident, hence, variations in the use of grammatical forms were negligible. Few differences have been found in studies on interaction among equal status or power. Reskin (1988) argues that equality in terms of power or status negates the concept of difference or variation in gender studies. Interestingly when we talk of power or status we discuss the concepts in the framework of role or status relationship. Perceived variations may be a result of unequal role/status which may be attributed to gender differences (Reskin 1988)

Grammatical Forms

An examination of the corpus reveals no variation in the use of parts of speech such as pronouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions. However there were variations noted with respect to the use of adverbs while narrating the critical incident (Table 1).

Table 1



Pronouns, direct and indirect are characterized by person. Concern of researchers focuses more on the use of the first and third person that is “I” and “those” which emphasize the self in relation to the “other”. In our corpus we did not find any such difference in use of pronouns which would highlight either “involvedness” (Argamon et al. 2003) or “objectivity” (Mulac 1998).

We are not aware of any literature that has dealt with the use of conjunctions and prepositions. Reason for the study of these two parts of the speech was the nature of function in the sentential construct. Conjunctions are joining words and conjoin two clauses. Ideally their effective use within a sentence can reduce the emphasis on pronouns, be they direct or indirect. Variations in frequency will point towards differences in sentence emphasis. In our corpus we were not able to evidence actual variations in sentential focus by an excessive use of pronouns.

A preposition describes a relationship between other words in a sentence. For instance, words like “but”, “however” have no meaning when used in isolation. However when conjoined with subject or object, they do connote a relationship. Almost involuntarily a speaker uses hands to express the relationship between two words, ideas, clauses or subject and object within a sentence. An almost equal count of prepositions in the language use by men and women in our corpus negates the well illustrated theory, that women use more of non-verbal gestures to express themselves.

A sentence cannot be complete without a verb which conveys action or sense of action within a sentence. Action words add to the power in the speech. More the number of action words, higher is the specific activity connoted in the speech. If we were to restrict ourselves to the idea that the speech of men is more objective, more dynamic and the speech of women is “powerless”, the frequency in the count of verbs in the speech of men and women would have varied.

Adverbs, as the name suggests add on to the meaning of the verb and provide information and the conditions under which an incident took place. Definitely the use of adverbs makes the speech more specific as concreteness is attempted through emphatic rendering of required details. Interestingly in our corpus, we did find a difference in the number of adverbs used by men and women. Women were found to use more adverbs than men.

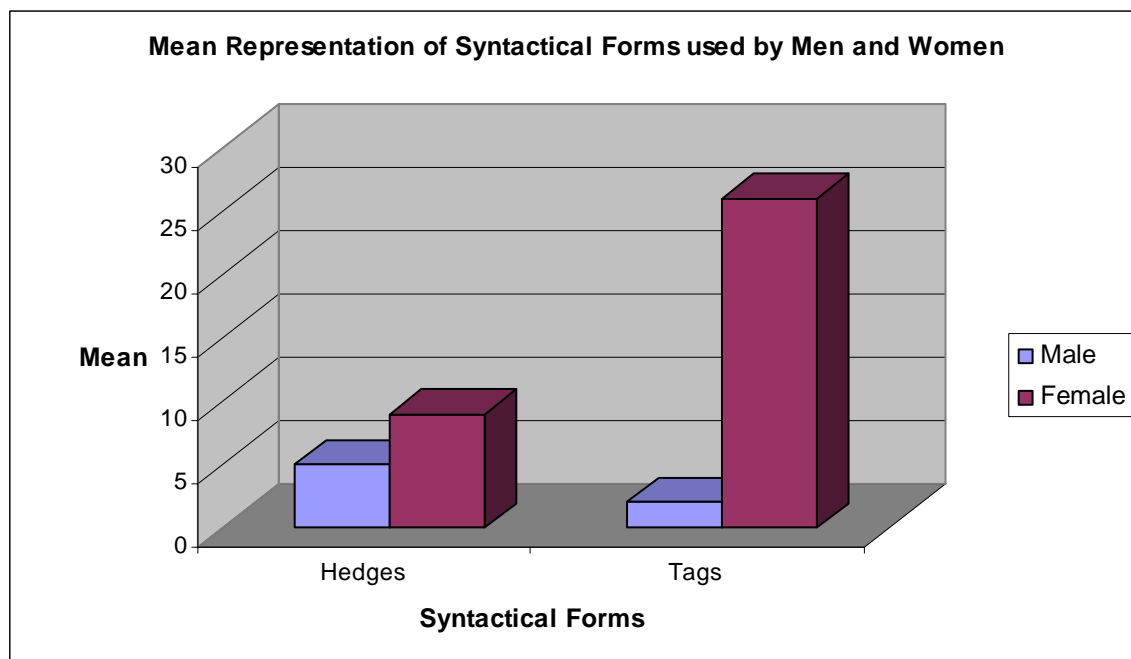
This proves to be contrary to the earlier work conducted by researchers that women are non-specific in the rendering of their speeches (Biber, Conrad, Leech, 2002). However before we make a claim which is contrary to the existing research findings we will reiterate that as this is an exploratory study in the Indian context, we need to replicate the process in either other branches of the same bank or other organizations before we can make a substantial claim.

Syntactical forms

Difference of opinion concerning use of syntactical forms has been evidenced in the use of literature on gender and language. Some researchers like Carli (1990), in a study on gender linguistic disparities in same and mixed sex teams demonstrated that many of the syntactical disparities as hedges, tag questions, disclaimers etc were used by women in mixed sex groups and the differences between them and men were clearly evident. Contrary to this finding interaction of men and women in same sex teams did not yield a similar conclusion.

O'Barr and Atkins in a study conducted in 1978 found major variations in the use of intensifiers, hedges, hesitation forms etc by men and women. Their findings add to and validate the argument proposed by Lakoff that the presence of these linguistic forms can make the speech "powerless".

Table 2



One of the syntactical forms we studied was ‘hedging’, which is normally beating around the bush and not coming straight to the point. The impact of the speech is weakened or reduced when hedges are used (Holmes 1995). In our corpus, there was a major difference in the frequency count of the number of hedges used by men and women in narrating the critical incident. Women were seen to use twice as many hedges as were used by men. However when studied in conjunction with the rest of the content and the context, we could not associate the concept of “powerlessness”, proposed by researchers (Lakoff 1975). Differences can also be a result of variations in style, a socio-linguistic factor, assigned by researchers (Lakoff 1979) to understanding the variations. Situational context (Freed & Greenwood 1996; McFadyen 1996; Mulac 1998) or status differences (Crossby and Nyquist 1977) need to be carefully analyzed before concluding that disparities in linguistic styles of men and women are an outcome of gender specifics.

The second syntactical form we studied was “tags”. Significant difference in the use of tags was found in our corpus. While a mean of the tags used by men was close to two, the mean of tags used by women was close to 26. The differences can be understood from the perspective of the role adopted by women in the study, which was one of facilitation of the process through politeness strategies. This was not the role adopted by men taking the interview.

This finding will be more relevant if we were to analyse the use/avoidance of tags with respect to the function rather than an account of the form. Some studies (Lapadat and Seesahai 1977) on analysis of informal data demonstrate that men use twice as many tags as women, while some (Fishman 1980) on a similar subject, reveal that women used three times as many tags as men.

There were disparities in the use of both hedges and tags in the language used by men and women to narrate critical incidents. If we were to go by earlier research we would be caught up in the cycle of assigning gender related conclusion to these variations. The variations were more in nature of the content and context rather than syntax. It was interesting to note that most of the women narrated incidents of compliance whereas majority of the men narrated incidents in which there was initial resistance which was then followed by a promise for compliance. Some studies state that tags are used by individuals (not gender specific) who have the responsibility of success of an interaction

(Johnson 1980; Holmes 1984b; Cameron et al. 1989). Further studies can be conducted using context, status, social role and goals as variables.

Discussion

In this study there was no statistically significant difference in grammatical forms used by employees in narration of a critical incident. We can discuss the “no difference” result as a contradiction to the exaggerated differences between groups composed of same-sex members. Butler (1990a) examines the social dominant perspective of laying emphasis on “established difference” rather than “natural divisions”. Two models - “masculine” and “feminine” have been suggested by researchers. Masculine is supposed to be ideal for organizational work and the feminine model is appropriate for relationship building. Contrary to this “convenience explanation” Borisoff and Hahn (1995) postulate that need of different models in different spheres arise from the compartmentalization of men and women and their work during the industrial revolution. Men went out to work and hence the style of communication came to be referred to as “masculine”. As women stayed back to manage the home and the children, their style became nurturing, which was reflected in their communication. Hence the communication style of women came to be referred to as “feminine”.

Contrary to the above stated facts, we will argue that with the entry of women in the organization, the masculine and the feminine models, postulated by earlier researchers, can no longer apply to the choice or use of language. We are unable to cite references which deal with similarities rather than dissimilarities as there is barely any literature which discusses the former. One of the reasons can be that null findings rarely find their way to publication (Bate, 1984). Another interesting example cited in Reeder’s article (1996) is of Fitzpatrick (1983) who found 8 similarities and 2 differences in interpersonal behaviours of men and women. The author spent the entire section on discussion on the two differences rather than the 8 similarities.

Employees within an organization do not display or demonstrate behavioural variations in understanding of situations or problems. Keeping the organizational goal in mind the communication is geared in favour of finding a solution rather than illustration of specific grammatical nuances which can be referred to as typically “male” or “female”.

Variations in use of syntactical forms between men and women do not necessarily stem from gender differences. Interpretations by researchers dispel the myth and give credence to the fact that gender cannot be studied in isolation. Context, content, individual style contribute to the variations. For instance, Preisler (1986) in some of the small group discussions found that tags tended to be used by those who adopted a facilitative role. Continuous shift in speech style to adjust to the needs of the receiver, has also been suggested by researchers. Giles and Smith (1979) argue that speech can be used to reduce or accentuate differences – to communicate social similarity, differences, approval or disapproval.

While obvious differences, as stated above, have been noticed by researchers, they have also proved that people, in general, modify their language in accordance with the situation or the social context. The reason attributed is that people try and accommodate the gender preferential language style which happens to match the linguistic style of the person she or he is speaking to rather than the speaker's gender, even during same sex conversation (Thomson, Murachver and Green 2001).

Mulac, Wiemann, Widenman and Gibson (1988) used the speech adoption theory (Giles and Smith 1979) which suggests that people tend to adopt the language and the communication pattern of the people operating in a particular group, which explains the in-group language semblance. Additionally Kim and Bresnahan (1996) in a study of four cultures found no differences in the communication goals of men and women. They stated that the “perceived difference” stemming out of stereotypes is much steeper than the “actual difference”.

Building upon the idea that few research papers do emphasise the similarities in language use between the sexes, we hope that the current research will be able to dispel myths that there are stark differences in terms of communication/language use between men and women. The corporates may use the results of this study to smoothen perceived rather than actual differences which hinder rather than promote group communication.

The growing number of women in organizations and their contribution to the corporate world has given rise to much research and debate. It is important for organizations to recognize and acknowledge the team contribution of men and women to their growing

businesses. Most of the operations within organizations are a result of collaborative effort of men and women working in mix sex teams. While both sexes use the same official language, the choice of words and sentential structuring – grammatical and syntactical – can and does make a difference. In the light of the above statements, the questions before us are:

1. Is there a difference in structuring of speech between individuals?
2. If there is, is it an outcome of the gender differences?
3. Can all individuals referred to as “men” or “women” be said to use a similar or different pattern?
4. What is the effect of organizational and in-group culture on the team members?
5. Do all members in the same sex or mixed sex team adopt the same grammatical and syntactical structure?

As there appears to be no study or to our knowledge no references to discovering similarities or disparities in the grammatical and syntactical forms in the Indian context, present work adds to the limited empirical research in this area. Superior performance through effective communication in same and mixed sex teams are some of the stemming benefits from this particular research.

Conclusion

We argue that differences evidenced in speech of men and women within organizations are not specific to gender considerations. Grammar and syntax, differentiating factors in language consideration are sensitive to situation, team and organization. Parts of speech as pronouns, adverbs, verbs, conjunctions and prepositions and syntax can be assessed and their relevance in a sentential construct attributed to the situational need rather than gender specific mannerisms or traits.

Relatively current emphasis on sex, gender and language highlights the need to comprehend language as a vehicle for furtherance of organizational goals rather than an emphatic statement on gender – specifics or differences. Based on grammar and grammatical constructs we have made a first attempt to provide an understanding to the choice and use of linguistic styles within the organizational context in the Indian scenario. Beginning with borrowings from the study of Lakoff, the paper concludes, contrary to the

earlier studies, that there are no differences in the grammatical constructs across genders. Variations in syntactical form can be attributed to aspects other than those related to “male” or “female” concepts of style. A study on the concept of style will require a framework which studies the linguistic form and the social functions in sync (Philips 1980). Additionally, “we must expand our consideration to aspects of speech other than those that deal with power and status, for femaleness is surely more than being polite, deferential and uncertain.” (Philips 1980, 539-540).

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