

Gender and language studies. A long road already traveled, yet longer (and curvier) roads ahead

Estudios de género y lengua. Un largo camino a nuestras espaldas; senderos, aun más largos y sinuosos, pendientes de explorar

MARC GANDARILLAS, PH.D.
University of North Dakota

doi: 10.20318/femeris.2022.7158

Abstract. In the present paper we analyze how divergence in language use across genders has received increasing scholarly attention since the late 1960s and –especially– early 1970s. While early research on the field is of-tentimes based on researcher introspection (Lakoff 1973), at this time we already find certain scholars that approach the matter from a purely empirical perspective (Labov 1966). Since the very early precursors of gender and language studies, such preliminary analyses were pivotal in paving the path to more methodologically complex insights into the gender-language relationship (Nichols 1978, Trudgill 1988, Goodwin 1988). In more recent years, gender has started to be regarded as a complex dynamic social construction, which has prompted the use of more refined methodologies based upon the idea that stylistic variation occurring within every speaker’s vernacular is not random but rather systematic.

Keywords: Gender and Language studies, pragmatics, gendered language, gender and linguistic status.

Resumen. En el presente artículo analizamos cómo la divergencia entre géneros en el uso de la lengua ha ido recibiendo una creciente atención académica desde finales de la década de 1960 y, especialmente, principios de los años 1970. Si bien las investigaciones pioneras en el campo a menudo se basan en la introspección del investigador (Lakoff 1973), a día de hoy ya encontramos ciertos académicos que abordan el tema desde una perspectiva puramente empírica (Labov 1966). Desde los primeros precursores de los estudios de género y lengua, estos análisis preliminares fueron fundamentales para allanar el camino hacia un conocimiento más complejo, desde el punto de vista metodológico, acerca de la relación entre género y lengua (Nichols 1978, Trudgill 1988, Goodwin 1988). En años más recientes, el género ha comenzado a ser considerado como un constructo social dinámico y complejo, lo que ha llevado al uso de metodologías más refinadas, basadas en la idea de que la variación estilística que se detecta, a nivel idioléctico, en la lengua vernácula de cada hablante no es aleatoria, sino sistemática.

Keywords: Estudios de género y lengua, pragmática, lengua con género, género y estatus lingüístico.

Divergence in language use across genders has received increasing scholarly attention since the late 1960s and –especially– early 1970s. While early research on the field is of-tentimes based on researcher introspection (Lakoff 1973), at this time we already find certain scholars that approach the matter from a purely empirical perspective (Labov 1966).

Since the very early precursors of gender and language studies, such preliminary analyses were pivotal in paving the path to more methodologically complex insights into the gender-language relationship (Nichols 1978, Trudgill 1988, Goodwin 1988). In more recent years, gender has started to be regarded as a complex dynamic social construction, which has prompted the use of more refined methodologies based upon the idea that stylistic variation occurring within every speaker's vernacular is not random but rather systematic.

Long gone are the days when sociolinguists used to focus on the study of language within and across individuals that were somehow viewed as prototypical in their respective societies (e.g., 'white, older, rural males,' sometimes humorously referred to as 'WORMs'). In an increasingly interconnected world, sociolinguistics has turned its attention to individual differences that are, at this point, difficult to categorize according to prototypical standards. Along these lines, gender has undergone substantial conceptualization from its traditional essentialist, binary perspective. Acknowledging that gender may vary swiftly from one particular individual to the next –and even intra-individually, over the decades– is key to capturing the complexity intrinsic to the very concept of gender.

A representative example of modern literature in the field is found in Holmes (1995), who –instead of general considerations regarding the connection between gender and language– examines complimenting strategies as a relevant communicative feature and –acknowledging cross-cultural differences in the light of the politeness theory– contrasts how much these are used across genders. The author concludes that women are more prone to use compliments (especially with other women) than men. Additionally, she perceives an inverse correlation between the use of compliments (especially those regarding actions) and higher social statuses.

A major challenge in the field of gender and language has been –and to date continues to be –that of debunking popular, deeply-rooted myths regarding the relationship between gender and language. For instance, it has been claimed that women talk more and resort to gossip more often than their male counterparts. However, it is essential to consider that many of such conclusions have been reached, not through empirical research, but rather within a context in which the so-called 'androcentric rule' prevails (i.e., those behaviors that are considered 'typically male' have been regarded as the rule, whereas every potential 'deviation' from the norm has been attributed to women). Debuk's writings constitute excellent examples that show how debunking such myths needs to start from, on the one hand, putting gender history into perspective (Dec 2016) and, on the other hand, fostering mindfulness on ingrained double standards and the terms by which these are typically expressed in certain social or political circles (e.g., *strident* women vs. *outspoken* men; Sep 25, 2019). Debuk's texts also show how important bonds are between the field of gender and language studies and other fields such as politics and –needless to say– everyday professional and private spheres.

Nowadays, it is commonly accepted that some of our choices in terms of language might be exuding certain degrees of sexism, which –dangerously enough– tends to go unnoticed. This applies to every language field, ranging from semantics (e.g., *bitch* vs. *dog*) to morphology (e.g., *stewardess* is based upon *steward*; in languages with gender inflec-

tion, such as Spanish or Catalan, male gender prevails over female gender when referring to a mixed-gender group of people). Male privilege in western cultures (and, accordingly, women's subordinate status) also appears to provide an explanation in terms of a potential major reason why women might have traditionally used –or rather *been viewed as* using– more 'facilitative' language. Along these lines, it is claimed that women tend to use more hedges, tag questions, rising intonation, and super polite forms (Lakoff 1973) than men, who, on the other hand, tend to be more prone to interrupt and impose their views through a –seemingly– more confident use of the language.

From the above-mentioned contrasts –some being mere myths lacking an empirical basis, while others being potentially explainable based on the traditional role of women in society– a polarized view on the relationship between gender and language has been established (partly, through parental guidance or education), with certain linguistic behaviors being considered mostly 'manly' (i.e., status-conferring) and others being regarded as rather 'lady-like' (i.e., acknowledging and reinforcing subordination). Also, women have traditionally appeared to be more conscious of their own status and role in society, which might relate to their preference for being more observant of the status quo and, consequently, using more standard language in comparison with men. This association between gender and social status (with women generally exhibiting social and linguistic behaviors that are typically associated with powerless groups) appears consistently in Holmes' (1995) study, which is briefly referenced above.

In connection with this idea, Trudgill's (1988) study appears to provide a valuable clue in understanding that, rather than simply 'male vs. female language,' it might be more appropriate to talk about 'language of power vs. powerlessness,' with gender being relevant, yet not the only variable involved (the other major one being social class). Specifically, insecurity due to social pressure –most typically found in women, in terms of gender, and the lower-middle class, in terms of social status– is reflected in language use, with self-evaluation tests revealing that women, unlike men (cf. 'covert prestige'), tend to over-report their own use of prestige forms.

Nichols (1978) also assists, to some extent, in debunking the scope of the term 'women's language' by highlighting the relevance of factors other than gender (especially living on the island vs. mainland, more vs. less mobile occupations). However, she concurrently concludes that, in relatively stable communities, women tend to be more conservative than men, which appears to somehow match some of the conclusions that Trudgill (1988) had previously reached.

A decade later, Eckert (1998) analyzes the relationship between gender and sociolinguistic variation by specifically focusing on the connection between phonological variation and social identity. The author observes that gender practices differ from (sub) culture to (sub)culture in connection with what she refers to as 'linguistic markets.' In this particular study, the environment studied corresponds to Belten High School, where success-oriented students ('jocks') appeared to systematically exhibit more conservative phonological patterns than their 'burnout' counterparts. This holds especially true for the experimental group of girls, who—citing the author's own conclusions—appear

to be 'putting these phonological resources to greater use than the boys,' likely in relation to 'women's greater use of symbolic resources to establish membership and status.' Also within the context of an educational setting, Goodwin (1988) analyzed boys' vs. girls' speech in play activities. Namely, she concluded that, while boy groups tended to be hierarchically organized, with members using explicit commands (e.g., 'I want the pliers!'), girls' groups appeared to be more egalitarian and prefer the use of suggestions or modals instead of more explicit directives (which were, in their case, limited to role-playing contexts in which girls were assuming a parental role).

In summary, we can state with confidence that all of the above-reviewed articles show that the field of gender and language has gone a long way since the times in which Lakoff and Labov conducted their –otherwise commendable– research. However, there is still a need for further research that –following in the footsteps of researchers such as Eckert, Trudgill, or Nichols– continues to systematically consider essential aspects such as individual variability, cross-cultural differences, and the multiple and swift changes that our modern society has undergone in the last couple of decades. In any case, it appears to be essential to approach the field with a fresh mind every time, which will allow the researcher to obtain empirical data by minimizing prejudice and debunking myths that are still deeply ingrained in modern society.

References

- Debuk, Deborah: <https://debuk.wordpress.com>.
 Dec 2016 Debuk: A brief story of gender.
 Sep 25, 2019 Debuk: In praise of strident women.
- Eckert, Penelope (1998). Gender and sociolinguistic variation. In Coates, J., & Pichler, P. (eds.), *Gender and Language: A Reader, 2nd edition*, 57-70. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Goodwin, Marjorie Harness (1988). Cooperation and competition across girls' play activities. In Coates, J., & Pichler, P. (eds.), *Gender and Language: A Reader, 2nd edition*, 89-111. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Holmes, Janet (1995). Complimenting – A positive politeness strategy. In Coates, J., & Pichler, P. (eds.), *Gender and Language: A Reader, 2nd edition*, 71-88. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Labov, William (1966). *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Lakoff, Robin (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society* 2: 45-80.
- Nichols, Patricia (1978). Black women in the rural south: Conservative and innovative. In Coates, J., & Pichler, P. (eds.), *Gender and Language: A Reader, 2nd edition*, 49-56. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Trudgill, Peter (1988). Sex and covert prestige. In Coates, J., & Pichler, P. (eds.), *Gender and Language: A Reader, 2nd edition*, 20-26. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.