Language & Gender

By: Dana Nichol & Celeste Ventresca
WL ED 300, Jamie Lupia
Introduction

Language is the primary means by which one interacts with and experiences the world. Whether it is Mandarin, American Sign Language, Swahili, or any other language, each person possesses a mode of expression which is an integral part of his or her personality. While each individual develops language uniquely, there are marked trends regarding the contrasting way males and females use language. This paper will explore the gravity of gender roles in the way that a child communicates through words. Case studies examining the social interactions between young girls and boys divulge an abundance of dissimilarities in language mannerisms between the sexes. Other theories will emphasize the biological incongruities which seek to explain boys and girls’ radical variance in language use. The highlighted case studies will also delve into how other cultures differ from the American gender roles associated with speech. And finally, there will be an analysis of the dynamics and benefits of second language acquisition among men and women of other cultures.

Social Interactions

One can learn volumes about the difference between boys and girls’ language development solely by observing them together. The gender discrepancies in language are molded not only by biological tendencies, but also by the way in which boys and girls are taught to interact by their parents and observing the world around them. Observing the conversation of children when only around their gender as well as when in cross-gender settings reveals telling dissimilarities.

A two and a half year long study of a 5- to 8-year-old classroom gleaned interesting results on the disparities in boys’ and girls’ speech. When boys were grouped
apart from girls, their play conversation centered on *knowledge display* in which they demonstrated how much they knew about interests such as dinosaurs, trucks, or Legos. They sported a competitive edge which included some *taboo talk,* using bad words or referring to private parts and bodily functions. Girls’ language play was entirely different; they tended to make up silly names, play clapping games, and sing chants.

In this study, conflict talk varied between genders, too. When in disagreement, one boy would sometimes threaten to tattletale or usually try to outsmart the other boy. Girls responded indirectly by telling secrets and excluding other girls in an effort to get revenge and “solve” problems. When the seating arrangement juxtaposed the boys and girls, they avoided interaction and displayed verbal animosity toward the opposite sex. Girls were called “ugly” and “dumb” and boys were called “weak” and “Mama’s boy.” This was in a study where they were segregated for over a year and then made to interact with each other, so these circumstances might not be totally representative of the norm. However, the divergences are not hard to accept as truth; the observed behaviors seem to fit the gender roles firmly established in society: girls are judged on appearance, and boys are judged on intelligence and ability (Kamler 42-44).

In *The Development of Language,* the author breaks down specific speech distinctions between girls and boys. Girls are more apt to use proper pronunciation, make requests, respond to rather than initiate conversation, and use expressive adjectives. A preschool-aged girl’s story is likely to feature characters with happy, functional relationships. A male peer is more likely to formulate a story full of strife, adventure, and disorder. Boys frequent imperatives and exhibit “more controlling and unmitigated speech styles” (Gleason 204). The aforementioned study made a sex comparison in the
forms of talk. Girls gleaned more connections from literature and recalled details of the stories better than the boys, who told more anecdotes from the stories and posed more questions (Kamler 52).

So what does this study illustrate? These linguistic divergences between young girls and boys show the perpetuated gender roles enforced by society, those labeling females as more verbally deft, indirect, judged on appearance, and responders to males; males as more assertive, driven, and judged on ability. In the book *Girls, Boys, & Language*, the author attests to the charge of gender role in language development:

Studies of gender and language use have suggested that language use is inextricably bound up with speakers’ personal and social identities: with how speakers present themselves, with how they are perceived by others, and with how they relate to one another. Language use, it is argued, supports asymmetrical relations between the sexes… In a wider sense, certain ways of speaking become established as normal; they affect the way women and men conventionally relate; and it is partly through talk that children learn to behave appropriately as girls and as boys (Swann 72).

Ergo, it is asserted that language development is suffused with the influences of social norms regarding what is appropriate colloquialism for a girl as opposed to a boy.

**Biological Sway**

How much of an effect does genetics have on determining the path of a boy’s language advancement in comparison to that of a girl’s? This question addresses the continuous debate of nature versus nurture. Concerning gender and language, research asserts a plausibility that the physiological variance between a male and a female contributes to the difference in their speech patterns. As a disclaimer, one needs to take heed not to put too much ascendancy on biology as a determinant of behavior because it encourages the attitude that the child’s environment cannot produce a change in his/her behavior, which is not the case.
Biological divergences in the male and female body involve the endocrine system. Unequal hormone levels are thought to explain the difference in assertiveness in girls and boys. Some researchers suggest that a female’s subservience is caused by having low levels of testosterone, the stereotypical ‘male’ hormone. In childhood, sex hormone levels are meager, but testosterone is essential in the development of a male fetus. Studies have discovered a positive relationship between aggression and testosterone in animals. While researchers have not been able to officially make the same claim regarding humans, there are studies which purport the testosterone-aggression correlation. This biological reasoning provides an explanation for why boys ask more questions and speak with more imperatives and less propriety than girls.

Another hormone-related discrepancy is noted in the trend of girls’ greater verbal aptitude. This phenomenon is attributed to less lateralization in the female brain than in the male brain. Lateralization is defined as:

The functional separation of the brain, with some skills, as language, occurring primarily in the left hemisphere and others, as the perception of visual and spatial relationships, occurring primarily in the right hemisphere (Dictionary.com: lateralization).

Weaker lateralization, or decreased specialization, is thought to promote more prominent language skills, whereas stronger lateralization is believed to espouse superior spatial skills. One theory linking lateralization to the endocrine system suggests that a higher testosterone level facilitates stronger specialization in brain functions. (Swann 7-9)

While biology and hormone levels are widely accepted as discriminators between girls’ and boys’ level of assertiveness and verbal ability, it is also important to note that parental and peer interactions may also play off of this concept. For example, is a boy who loves to be obstreperous and argumentative evoking a response from his
environment because of his level of testosterone, or is he responding to an environment that treats calling out and being rambunctious as expected behavior?

While it is evident that genetics play a role in the differentiation between gender-appropriate vernaculars, is it the most important factor? Many will argue that it is not:

In dealing with...language use, this book is necessarily concerned with some of the social processes that contribute to children’s developing gender identity and their educational aptitudes and preferences. This is not to suggest that biology is irrelevant, but [one does not take it as] a convincing explanation of the range of difference between girls’ and boys’ behaviour, many of which are culturally specific (Swann 10).

One can conclude that a child’s journey through learning a language is affected by both natural characteristics of his or her body as well as the environment in which the child is placed. Each factor influences the others and makes for a complex set of components working together in the entire sphere of language acquisition.

**Language and Gender throughout the World**

As one explores different cultures, one discovers the countless differences that exist across different cultures throughout the world. People have different diets, modes of dress, customs, and a variety of other aspects of life that are unique to their culture. One obvious aspect of life that often distinguishes different cultures from one another is language. Gender, however, seems to be something that is often not considered as something that varies from culture to culture. However, the reality is that the concept of gender is a matter that can vary throughout different cultures. While in the Western world the notion of gender includes the binary opposition of the “male” and “female” sexes, other cultures do not limit their definition of gender to these two categories. In certain Native American tribes, for example, the *berdache* or “two-spirit” makes up a third gender that is considered to be half man and half woman. The *hijra* in India is a
gender that is defined as neither man nor woman. If certain cultures have a different perspective on the overall concept of gender, it is conceivable that each gender’s use of language will vary from culture to culture as well. (Pavlenko and Piller 23)

A degree of variation seems to exist among men and women regarding multilingualism and second language acquisition. This variation can be observed across different cultures as well. A number of studies on multilingualism have highlighted the differences between men and women in minority and immigrant populations. In these communities, proficiency in a second language is esteemed greatly as it allows for more opportunities socially and also tends to provide financial advantages. However, while these communities esteem multilingualism, women are often discouraged from both the learning and use of a foreign language, while men receive full access to these opportunities and are encouraged to pursue them.

The discrimination that immigrant and minority women face presents itself in a number of forms that limit their “mobility, access to majority language education, and the workplace”. Limitations on mobility often stem from the gender ideology of women as “housekeepers and mothers”, as some women may not have access or the financial means to send their children to daycare. When women do have the opportunity to attend language classes, they are often denied the attention in the classroom that men in the same class receive in abundance. This phenomenon has been observed in Losey’s study on Mexican-American women in the community college setting and also in Heller’s study of immigrant girls studying French in a Canadian high school classroom. An example of the linguistic limitations for women in the workplace can be found in Goldstein’s 1995 study of Canadian factory workers. All of the co-workers in the factory
were non-native English speakers, so there was an unwritten law that they were not to speak English since not all of the employees would understand it. These limitations, along with a variety of others outlined by Pavlenko and Piller, give evidence of the linguistic differences that exist between men and women in the acquisition of a majority-spoken second language (25-26).

While many aspects of women’s lives seem to inhibit their ability to acquire a second language, young women in immigrant groups have demonstrated more advanced abilities to maintain their native language. Lutz’s study of the maintenance of Spanish among young Latinos examines this trend. Lutz draws the conclusion that while studies have indicated that “girls have a greater verbal aptitude than boys in general”, the linguistic social environment of girls seems to be different than that of boys, which contributes to greater language retention. Lutz also cites Portes and Hao’s findings that girls have a greater “attachment to parental languages” (1427). Another factor contributing to girls’ increased tendency to be bilingual is gender role expectations on the whole. As Blair and Cobas found in their study, Latino girls tend to serve as the “language mediator for the family” (297). This culturally imposed position makes Latino girls more likely to retain their native language.

Similar findings of greater language maintenance have been observed with women in minority groups. These findings have been attributed to a lack of pressure to learn English, as compared to men, and also to the likeliness for women to teach their children their minority language. (Lutz 1427)

Learning a second language for both men and women in many cultures has been a source of liberation (Pavlenko and Piller 30). In order to break away from the limitations
of customary Mexican living, Mexican-American women studying at universities are often known to solely use English, according to Solé’s study. High school girls in Japan have shown an overwhelming interest in studying English and training for professions that deal with the English language, and the enrollment of women majoring in foreign languages in Japanese universities is astounding with females making up 67% of these majors (Pavlenko and Piller 30). Men have also found liberation in bilingualism. Thonga men of South Africa have gained greater social and economic benefits by learning the Zulu language, the language of a more dominant South African people (31).

Overall, it is evident that learning a second language can open a world of opportunities to men and women alike. While in many cultures the odds often seem to be against women in getting the opportunity to acquire a second language, the social contexts in which women use language could serve as a means to practice a new language as opportunities begin to increase.

**Findings**

In the realm of social interaction research, all of the studies we encountered make a relation between the importance of gender roles and the way that children speak. The cultural norm affects how certain speech patterns are viewed as appropriate for boys and inappropriate for girls, and vice versa. There is large agreement in the studies we read on this subject.

As for biological importance, there is not a wealth of information on this topic. What we do understand is that hormone level does have an appreciable effect on a male and female’s demeanor. The theory is that more testosterone affects more assertiveness
and use of imperatives, whereas more estrogen affects weaker brain lateralization and therefore a greater verbal capacity.

With regard to second language acquisition, it seems that women often are hindered based on culturally imposed obligations. However, given the opportunity to pursue studies in a second language, women gain the prospect of attaining the power that comes with multilingualism, which men have traditionally held.

Conclusion

After examining language and gender from both a social interaction and a biological perspective, and also after looking at the realities of language and gender regarding second language acquisition and maintenance, one can see that gender is a significant element in the formula of human communication. Scientific evidence has shown how even before a child is capable of talking, their hormones seem to contribute to their linguistic tendencies. These tendencies are then socially modified and shaped to form a child’s own linguistic personality as they interact with their peers and families. When a second language is introduced into the picture, the social influences of gender continue to hold authority.

However, when making assessments and conclusions about language, the limitation of one’s studies strictly to gender would give an inadequate picture of the full scope of language. In order to make valid conclusions, it is important to keep in mind and observe the numerous factors that can have an impact on language, such as family structure, culture, religious views, social class, and other variables of this sort. By taking these dynamics into account along with gender, one can gain a more comprehensive perspective on how people of all cultures use language.
Dana’s Reflection

I am very intrigued by the affect that gender role has on society. Through doing this research I have learned that language is just another area in which these roles are substantiated. What I have learned has been very enlightening because it gives me a clearer definition of the way women are perceived in society as opposed to men and a reason as to WHY they are perceived that way. It is not just an arbitrary generalization to say that females tend to have greater verbal skills, but it can be biologically supported because of higher estrogen levels. Nor is it arbitrary to say that males are more assertive, because there are studies that show that it is a social norm for them to be more direct which is, in turn, supported by the appearance of higher testosterone levels. Even more interesting to me is trying to decipher which is the cause of which: Is it the hormone levels affecting the behavior which evokes a response from the environment? Or is it the way parents and peers give different treatment to boys as opposed to girls which molds their ideas of what is befitting behavior? These questions fascinate me and now that I am more informed on this subject, I can ask myself these questions and form my own hypotheses about what I observe to be the cause and effect of these gender-induced language discrepancies.
Works Cited


