

An Investigation of Gender Differences Between Women's and Men's Informal Discussion in Iranian EFL Context

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Abstract

The language used by women and men differ in all speech communities. In order to examine some of these variations, the present study aimed to investigate the differences in an informal written discourse. For this purpose, a comparison between men's and women's informal language was made regarding length of utterances, questions, intensifiers, and hedges. Results revealed that men employed higher length of utterance and slightly more hedges than women. On the other hand, women tended to ask more questions and used more intensifiers than men. The findings may pave the way to better understand the world of communication.

Keywords: Gender, Utterance, Questions, Intensifiers, Hedge.

1. Introduction

Gender was regarded as a sociolinguistic variable, just like social class, age, ethnicity and social status. One of the most important issues in relation with language and gender is the gender difference regarding the spoken & written language. Cross-gender communication is indeed an important area for research as its findings will be useful for various parties, namely to both genders, local researchers, and the community. Besides, it is pertinent to have some knowledge about gender differences in using language to help contribute towards the development of more effective communication between genders in different contexts (Gorjian, 2008). Many studies have been conducted to identify the differences between men's and women's speech style (e.g. Dousti & Eslami Rasekh, 2016; Hermosilla, 2012; Mei-Rong & Hsieh, 2007; Michael, Liaw, Muthusamy & Veeravagu, 2010; Ogunsiji, Farinde & Adebisi, 2012; Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012). Most of these studies highlighted some crucial results about the differences in linguistic features of men's and women's speech in terms of politeness, hedges, voice speed, contents, functions, questions, etc. Gender differences in politeness suggest that women generally behave more politely than men (e.g. Bayles, 2009; Hermosilla, 2012). Regarding the length of utterance and use of hedges, some studies indicate that men tend to use fewer utterances, fewer hedges and more

nonstandard forms comparing to women (e.g. Dousti & Eslami Rasekh, 2016; Subrayan et al, 2010). In terms of voice intensity, there are undisputedly some differences between males and females. Females' voices usually have different characteristics from the males and they exhibit different range of verbal skills from their male counterparts. In conversation involving both sexes, many researchers like James and Drakish (1993) agree that men speak more than women and when men talk to men, they mainly focus on competitive matters and teasing, sports, aggression and doing things. Women, on the other hand, when talking to the same sex, discuss subjects involving the self, feelings, affiliation with others, home and family. Mei-Rong and Hsieh (2007, p. 92, 93) conducted a study to compare gender-related differences in the use of language for emotion terms. They came to a conclusion that both men and women used different languages to express their feelings and emotions. They said that the male participants mostly used nouns while most of the words mentioned by the female participants were adjectives and verbs. Furthermore, Shakouri and Saligheh (2012, p. 4) suggests that "males tend to use linguistic devices such as interruptions, directives, and sentence-initial conjunctions. Females, in contrast, tend to rely more heavily upon questions, justifiers, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns and word-initial adverbs". Although a large number of studies have been done concerning language and gender, very few researches have examined the gender differences regarding the characteristic of informal discussion between males and females. In order to fill this gap, the present study intends to identify the differences in linguistic features of men's and women's informal discussion regarding the following features: length of utterance, questions, intensifiers, and hedges.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

24 (12 males and 12 females) MA university students majoring in ELT were chosen. They were all native speakers of Persian and their age ranged from 25 to 32. The selection of these participants was based on a non-probability convenience sampling procedure. To address their homogeneity, it must be mentioned that all these students had successfully passed MA university entrance exam which is a competitive one in Iran.

2.2 Data Collection

Comments of participants were collected through researchers' designed discussion group in telegram, which is a popular cell phone application in Iran. Three general topics including sport, occupation, and marriage were given to the participants in the group. These topics were chosen by participants out of twenty general topics through a survey prior to the study. The participants were asked to be active during three days, to chat, discuss, raise questions and leave comments in relation to the topics. For each day, they were supposed to discuss one of the topics

for two hours, from 10 to 12 p.m., since all of the participants were free during these two hours. After that, the participants' conversations were analyzed to see the realizations of the intended aspects including length of utterance, questions, intensifiers, and hedges. Furthermore, a comparison between women's and men's linguistic features was made by referring to the above-mentioned aspects.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data in this study, the researchers made use of frequency counts to show the length of utterances, questions, intensifiers, and hedges produced by the males and females. The data was analyzed considering the procedure of protocol analysis (as cited in Seliger & Shohamy, 2008). Listed below are the stages involved in analyzing those data:

- a. Written comments are made of the verbal protocols for each subject.
- b. The protocols are carefully reviewed and notes are made relating to the linguistic features used by both genders according to themes or categories.
- c. A comprehensive list of all the linguistic features used by both gender will be compiled.
- d. This list will be analyzed in an attempt to collapse and combine certain themes or categories.

Furthermore, the following table is adapted from Michael, Liaw, Muthusamy, and Veeravagu (2010) as a guide to determine the frequency of questions, hedges, and intensifiers realized in the utterances of male and female participants.

Table 1 *Utterance Features and Examples*

Type	Example
Questions	a. Yes/No questions e.g. <i>Are you employed?</i> b. Wh-questions e.g. <i>What's today's date?</i> c. Tag questions e.g. <i>They didn't call you, did they?</i>
Hedges	a. phrase type e.g. <i>I think/ suppose / guess, I mean</i> b. Adverbial e.g. <i>maybe, probably, generally</i> c. Adverbial used with the negative e.g. <i>(not) really, (not) very</i> d. Generalized adjunct e.g. <i>or something, or whatever, sort of, kind of</i>
Intensifiers	A word, usually an adverb, that is used to emphasize an adjective, adverb, or verb, e.g. <i>absolutely, so, very, many, much, etc.</i>

3. Results

After analyzing the comments of both genders, it is discovered that men and women exhibit some distinct linguistic features in their speech. These differences are tabulated and discussed in terms of turn taking, produced utterances,

questions, intensifiers, and hedges for each gender. Table 2 shows the frequency of each feature for male and female participants.

Table 2 *Males' and Females' Utterance Features*

	Males	Females	Total
Turn Taking	321	203	524
Produced Utterances	2350	1860	4210
Questions	56	123	179
Hedges	43	35	78
Intensifiers	144	322	466

In almost all of the comments, it was found that male participants dominated the discussion by taking 321 turns and produced 2350 words as compared to females who took 203 turns and 1860 words. Women raised more questions than men. The number of total questions used by females were 123 and 56 questions were raised by males. There was not a large number of application of hedges for both genders. Men used 43 cases of them and women applied 35 ones which, in turn, reveals a slight difference between the genders. Finally, women employed 322 types of intensifiers while men applied only 144 types of them.

4. Discussion

As mentioned above, it was found that men tend to have higher length of utterance than women. This could be partly because of the topic of their conversation which focused mainly on sports and occupations. Generally, men seem to be more interested in sports than women do. On the other hand, females tended to talk more about the topic of marriage. This is usually an interesting topic for girls in Iran. Notably, women posed more questions than men. This is in line with findings of James and Clerke (1993) and Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) which confirm that women asked more questions than men. Considering the type of question, women frequently asked simple types of yes / no questions while men raised more open ended questions. Some of the questions raised by women demanded information about sports events. This could be due to the lack of information of women about sports since they do not generally follow sports events as much as men do. Furthermore, women tended to ask more questions for men and vice versa. This could be as a result of the interest of each gender to the opposite one. Intensifiers tended to be realized more in women's utterances. The two frequent intensifiers used by women include *very* and *much*. In many cases, women employed them to express their gratitude to other participants of the study. On the other hand, men did not employ much appreciation to other members and they used a few of them for more

personal matters. Concerning the use of hedges, men employed slightly more hedges than women. This finding does not suggest a meaningful difference between male and female participants since there is only a small difference between them in this relation. This is in contrast with findings by Lakoff (1975) who realized that women used considerably more fillers, hedges than men. As mentioned earlier, both genders used quite a few types of hedges probably because the given topics did not require them to give uncertain information.

5. Conclusion

Understanding gender differences in using language will help men and women to understand one another better and develop a more effective communication. It is necessary for English teachers and learners to know about the potential problems of communication and make a conscious attempt to overcome these problems. Effective communication is enhanced when there is awareness about gender differences in linguistic features in the speech of men and women and the importance of respect for one another (Gorjian, 2008). This study has attempted to examine the differences between female and male informal language in some aspects. In this connection, results revealed some considerable differences between the two genders. However, findings on gender differences by researchers from this particular context may not be generalizable for other contexts because in different situations and areas conversational styles of males and females may vary considerably. To say whether this is a question of gender or simple differences in conversational style would require much more research. Moreover, differences in using language between the two genders may be due to some changes through time.

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