

# Gender and Sex Based Differences in Lexical Directions: A Study on Language Theories

Serajum Munira<sup>1</sup>, Amzad Hossain<sup>2</sup>, Meherun Nessa<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Green University of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, Government Edward College, National University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>3</sup>Department of Language (English), Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Email: amzad15december@gmail.com

**How to cite this paper:** Munira, S., Hossain, A., & Nessa, M. (2020). Gender and Sex Based Differences in Lexical Directions: A Study on Language Theories. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 10, 93-102. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2020.104007>

**Received:** October 15, 2019

**Accepted:** March 30, 2020

**Published:** April 2, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

## Abstract

This paper aims at presenting an investigation into the theories of gender and sex-based language which are detailing the deficit, the dominance and the sub-cultural approach as defined by many social researchers and linguists in the field of gender and sex discourse. Tertiary level students have been repeatedly identified as a source of inter-individual variation in language development; however, their interactions have been investigated infrequently. Though sex differences are constant focal points for experiments regarding emerging language skills, data remain scarce and are not consistent across university life. The questions as to whether university impacts male and female students equally, as well as concerning the consistency of these differences throughout university socialization, remain open. In this research, the consistency of sex differences among the tertiary level students has been evaluated in the light of language theory. Therefore, the debate about whether language should be studied as a separate, distinct entity or it can be resolved if the notion of activity is adopted as it would be allowed for the understanding of language as constituting reality, reflecting modification and developments. Following the crises of the society of the past and present era, both similarities and dissimilarities between men and women speech appear to be significant issues which are worth studying. Finally, the study demonstrates in the field of language to understanding how and when language use constructs gender differences as a social category.

## Keywords

Lexical Directions, Language Theories, Gender Studies, Gender and Sex Based Differences

## 1. Introduction

It is important to take a wide range of theoretical frameworks and many differ-

ent theories into consideration which play an instrumental role in examining the relationship between an individual's gender and specific features of his/her language. The target of this study is to present gender as one particular social category. Analysts, who adopt this approach, treat gender as an identifiable social variable for the purpose of their experiment. The fact justifies that most people have an intuitive view on what gender categories mean and share a common conception of gender.

According to [Cameron's \(2008\)](#) definition, main features of anti-essentialist framework are: emphasis on diversity, criticism of big narratives, insistence on deconstructing bipolar differences, and tendency to question classifications which appear to be invariant and natural.

[Coates \(1994\)](#) elucidated the principle of doing gender, indicating that performing gender refers to presenting oneself as a "gendered being". According to [Humm \(2003\)](#), the gender is a "cultural shaping" as well as an ongoing, lifelong process which means that basically, gender is unstable and multiple or "non-unitary". It takes place primarily through different discourses such as the discourses of male superiority, and of gender equity. It is considered a changing product of a given context (e.g. public discussion), and as playing a role in constituting the social practices of that context. The word gender is described as a culturally designed group of qualities given to the men or to the women.

The definition of gender elaborates the concept of sex, male and female together with the notions of masculinity and femininity. It is argued by [Eckert and McConnell-Ginet \(2003\)](#) that sex is concerned with biological aspects which are primarily related to productive potential, but gender is the social illustration of biological sex. The characteristics of males and females, people's awareness of themselves and others as male and female as social phenomena is described here. It is further shown by them that gender is a learnt behavior which is somehow imposed by social mechanism. In other words, gender is collaborative as it engages individuals to the social system. Therefore, gender is not something we have but we do.

### **The Background of Gender Studies**

It has been found that male and female students at tertiary level do not generally choose linguistics as their major for the purpose of achieving masculine or feminine identities. To be actual, they focus on gendered linguistic strategies in order to perform pragmatic and interactional functions of language and, thus roles in a gendered way are formed. It is the manner in which people constitute their identities while acting within a social role that is linked with gender, such as: a good mother is also a good manager. A large area of literature on Sociology of Language is full of contents which are related to differences between men and women speech patterns. Research on gender linguistics began in the early 70s. After [Lakoff \(1975\)](#) had published his famous article entitled Language and Women's Position in this field, many researchers became interested in studying this area and testing their ideas. Lakoff's study suggests that males' speech differ

from that of females' and restates that women are inferior to men in terms of their social position. Lakoff (1975), Mitlz & Borker (1982), Butler (1993), Deuchar (1988), Cameron (2008), Holmes (1984), Humm (2003), Tannen (1990), are those who have done some researches abroad about gender linguistics.

Research on Feminist's approach from the 1960s onwards has enunciated a critical stance towards gender as an analytical category. Here, the researchers examined the fundamental history of gender studies in constructing and representing gender. In the last 20 years, feminist sociolinguistic research has typically been concerned with whether, and how, women and men use language differently, and whether these differences are symptomatic of women's subordinate social status, or contribute to their subordination, or are merely markers of gender difference, and are the result of different sub-cultural norms rather than asymmetrical power relations.

Linguists are always been interested in how power is achieved and maintained through discourse, and in evaluating and re-valuing women's conversational style. They focused on certain features of conversation, and the differences in the use of these features by men and women. Among the most interesting studied features are the following:

Turn-taking, which includes looking at the proportion of time for which any speaker hold floor, the average length of turns, and also whether the exchange of turns happens without a discernable gap (latching), or whether there are pauses between turns, or overlapping speech, or interruption (Edelsky, 1981; Coates, 1987, 1994), questions and tag questions (Fishman, 1980; Cameron, 2008) and topic introduction and development (Coates, 2016; Tannen, 1990). Back channel support, when the listener makes "mmm", "yeah", "uhuh" sounds, or marks that they are actively listening in other verbal or nonverbal ways (Fishman, 1980; Coates, 2016). The use of "hedging and epistemic modality" is applied to qualify the strength of the speaker's opinion. This is realized by the use of expressions such as "perhaps", "suppose", and epistemic modal auxiliaries such as "could", or "might" (Holmes, 1984; Coates, 1987). Aggravated and mitigated directives and responses, which relate to how overtly "orders" are given, or dissent is voiced (Goodwin, 1998; West & Zimmermann, 1987). Gender-related differences have been traced and been found in all the above features of conversation in numerous recent studies; however, the studies have not always been in agreement in their findings, or in the interpretations of their findings.

## 2. Gender and SEX Based Language Theories

### 2.1. Differences Theories

This theory is built up as a reaction primarily to Lakoff's (1975) deficit and dominance theories. In essence, the researchers claim that the reason for the different biological forms of language used by male and female students is due to their early socialization. Most important features of the difference or cultural difference approach are connected with psychological differences and imbalance

between male and female empowerment in social structure.

An innate biological difference is cited by some scholars through explanation of the differences in male and female language. This theory indicates that biological differences not only lead to psychological differences but also different rates of language acquisition. Such as, women mostly choose to give importance to the development of relationship, and concentrate on involvement with others and interdependence between people (Gilligan, 1982). On the other hand, men value autonomy and detachment and seek independence, focusing on hierarchical relationships. Many, however, would attribute such differences to socialization rather than biology.

Another criterion is social power that also determines linguistic behavior of people. As per this view, society sets up more interaction scopes for male as societies are mostly male dominated (West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to Deuchar (1988), powerless members of the society are expected to be more polite. As women enjoy less power than men do, they appear to be more polite than men. Women tend to present their politeness by means of linguistic elements.

Argument forwarded by the supporters of difference or dual-cultural approach suggests that male speech is focused on competitiveness, whereas female speech pattern shows the sign of cooperative conversational style (Coates, 2016; Cameron, 2008). According to Coates, Maltz's and Broker's (1982) claims were born in the conversational style of her female subjects. Those women exercised some linguistic features which are believed to be used more by female than men, such as: gradual topic development, frequent and minimal answers (Fishman, 1980). In conclusion, Coates mentioned that "overlapping speech" and linguistic patterns that lead to tone down speaker's expression are aspects of cooperative conversation. She further states that women talk reflects their aim, such as consolidating friendship and developing rapport.

Tannen's (1990) experiment on an array of speech actions, including advice-giving, story-telling, reactions to another's account of problems, asking for and providing information, compliments, gossips, etc, led her to come up with a view that men deal with the world depending on the hierarchical structure in which everyone does not hold the same rank, whereas women treat all as individuals in a single network. She went on explaining the dual-culture model and argued that conversations are devices that people use to have good command over someone or the situation and to defend themselves against verbal attack or bullying. Actually, the concepts of the dual-culture approach suggest that childhood is the base of differences, because male and female children are directly or indirectly instructed to choose games and social network that the society thinks suitable for them. For example, girls play in small group and in friendly atmosphere, on the other hand, boys play in larger group which mostly have hierarchical order (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). Hence, it is obvious that just like regional and social variations, gender differences are also created based on the physical and social separation.

However, according to the basic nature of the difference or dual-cultural model, it has some weakness akin to those of dominance model. The model ignores the interaction of the following aspects: age, sex, race and class. As [Uchida \(1998\)](#) says, “women and men belong to many interconnected social groups in addition to that of their own sex, and an individual is more than a ‘woman’ when interacting with others”. Apart from that, adults and immature ones do not have the same view of the world, so the assumption is that the application of the same rules in different contexts is simplistic.

According to [Eckert & McConnell-Ginet \(1999\)](#) and [Henley & Kramarae \(1991\)](#) the difference method shows a distinct lack of study on power and dominance which play a vital role in defining men and women interactions styles. Such as, the concept of the dual-culture takes breakdown in communication between men and women as the consequence of cross-cultural misunderstanding rather than the result of dominance of men over women in the society. It is more like a “no-fault” linguistic model where the negative impacts of communication are blamed on the cross-cultural differences.

[Eckert & McConnell-Ginet \(2003\)](#) mentioned some more shortcomings of the difference or dominance patterns. First of all, extreme stances are followed by the difference/dominance paradigms; it is seen that power and male dominance cover only one area, while the other places emphasize on gender separation and difference. Another point is that single approach is too simplistic to provide important details. What appears finally is that a focus on dominance does not take the importance of differences in experience and beliefs into consideration.

## 2.2. Deficit and Dominance Theories

These studies found that “dominance approach” provides a traditional negative judgment about female speech pattern which the author considered as an outcome of women’s political and cultural subordination to men. That is why women’s linguistic differences and flaws are attributed to imbalance of empowerment between male and female, and men’s speech style depicts their political command and cultural domination over women ([Freeman & McElhinny, 1996](#)). [Lakoff \(1975\)](#) adds that women’s speaking style presents their lower-level positions in the social-hierarchy. In this way, the signs of powerlessness and fumbling nature were spotted in women’s linguistic patterns which are not adequate to secure their power and position in social management system.

[Lakoff \(1975\)](#) argues that women’s speech pattern is deficient and lacks authoritative and assertive approach. Her observation also suggests that women are criticized and scolded if they do not maintain female linguistic values and, thus speech pattern or linguistic behavior appears to be a bar to female empowerment in the society.

[Lakoff’s \(1975\)](#) ideas on female language were classified by [Freeman & McElhinny \(1996\)](#) into three categories. First of them is the scarcity of resources that would enable women to be more assertive. The second one is the language

that influences women to talk about insignificant topics and the third category is the language that requires women to be submissive and speak tentatively. They also drew up a broad list of Lakoff's claims as mentioned below:

- 1) Use of expletives while women use weaker ones;
- 2) Women's speech is more polite than men's;
- 3) Trivial, unimportant topics are considered to be women's domain;
- 4) Women use empty adjectives;
- 5) Women use tag questions more often than men;
- 6) Women express uncertainty through the use of the question intonation pattern;
- 7) Women tend to speak in "italics" (women use more intensifiers);
- 8) Hedges are used more often by women;
- 9) Hyper-correct grammar is a feature of women's speech;
- 10) Women do not tell jokes (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996).

In order to determine the accuracy of Lakoff's (1975) claims, the above-mentioned features have been investigated by other researchers. They conducted empirical research that rebutted many of Lakoff's claims. According to West & Zimmermann (1987), people exercise interruptions to silence others and, men have high tendency to interrupt women whereas this is usually not common in women. The study of interruptions also appeared to be more complex than it was believed by Zimmermann & West who considered interruptions to be "a device for exercising power and control in conversation" (1987). However, Tannen points out "to claim that a speaker interrupts another is an interpretive, not a descriptive act" (Tannen, 1990).

The reason behind tentativeness of women's speech is often said to be their way of using hedges. Hedges are linguistic forms, such as: "I think", "you know", "I'm sure", "sort of", "perhaps", etc. Lakoff's claim appears to be convincing as women's speech is full of hedges. She explained the reason that women are raised to believe that their speech should not be heavy as too much strength can go against their ladylike or feminine features (Lakoff, 1975: p.54). Coates (1994) provides an explanation as to why men's speech lacks the use of hedges and says that men prefer discussing on impersonal subjects. Another study on hedges was conducted by a prominent researcher, Holmes (1984) who proved hedges to be multi-functional. Both certainty and uncertainty in the conversation can be reflected by hedges. According to Lakoff (1975), females use more tag questions (i.e. I did—didn't I? He was—wasn't he?) than males do and claims that tag questions have connection with tentativeness.

It has already been mentioned that there are distinct limitations of the experiment on dominance approach. The key inherent problem that lies with the difference approach is that theory which is focusing on men's social position and power and portraying women as helpless ones who are dominated by patriarchal society to speak and act in passive, irrational and ineffective manners (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). Dominance, weakness, passivity and deficiency are placed in the same category (Uchida, 1998)—these features are adequately presenting

women as the submissive members of the society. Jaggar (1983) states that this is “depreciating the amount of power women have succeeded in winning and minimizing the chances of further resistance”.

### 2.3. Social Constructive Theories

As there were limitations of the difference/dominance approaches, further study on the theories of language and gender became indispensable for the researchers. With the passage of time, the study of language has become a medium of understanding gender as an essential element in developing social identities. According to Freeman & McElhinny (1996), language use is the key to understand the social world”. Besides constructing social identities, it plays a great role in building social relationships (Ochs, 1993). Ochs (1993) argues that gender is indexed by a small-scale of linguistic elements. It is also claimed by Ochs that language is dialogue based and it is not the language that contributes to the construction of social identities to a great extent, rather social identities are negotiated and created during the process of interaction.

Cameron (2008) believes that linguists conducting research on the formation of gender identities and gender relationship need to go beyond lexical choice, such as: who is doing what, in which situation and what are the consequences. Therefore, it appears that fundamental doctrine of social constructivist gender theory is that gender is a social construct/construction which is performative in nature. These concepts were suggested by Goodwin (1998) and Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003). Goodwin’s study on language and gender in a single community indicates that activities of individuals should be research criteria instead of culture, gender, groups, individuals, etc.

Consequently, the debate as to whether language should be investigated as a separate and distinct entity, as Freeman & McElhinny (1996) suggest, can be solved if activity is adopted as the research paradigm which can lead to the proper understanding of language: as the constructor of reality and reflector of modification and development. Apart from identifying dissimilarities between men and women language, research should also focus on similarities. This method will help to understand how and when language use constructs gender differences as a social feature.

According to Eckert & McConnell (2003), the categories as class, race and ethnicity are those social aspects in which gender constructs are embedded. Separating people based on their gender is discouraged in favor of what Butler (1993) termed as “gender as a performative, social construct”. Some feminist researchers like Cameron (2008) and Sunderland (2004) also supported Butler’s concept. Discourse is the key device that should be studied to understand how gender is performed. According to Ginet, languages are responsible for constituting social identities. Sunderland’s, approach appears to be the same, endorsing the theoretical shift from “social learning to social constructionism” (Sunderland, 2004). Though social constructivist theory of language and gender sets up a much better platform for studying gender than the difference/dominance paradigms, Sunder-

land points some questions yet to be answered, for example construction and its relationship with gender. In other words, what confirmations are there, is that the construction goes beyond words spoken and written.

### **3. Critical Analysis on Why Gender Is Social Term of the Society in the Global Platform**

This review study is an introduction to the study of human languages across the globe. This is concerned with a considerable amount of varieties among the existing languages, as well as the common traits that cut across the differences. Furthermore, it presents a number of analytic tools for comparing and contrasting different languages, and for observing one particular language in a large linguistic perspective.

Topics chosen reflect the major aspects and focus of this research. Instead of discussing traditional branches of linguistics (semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology), this paper primarily dealt with the following questions and on the basis of language theories of Linguists' researches:

- 1) "How and why do languages bear a resemblance to each other in the light of Linguists' researches?"
- 2) "How and why do languages are distinguishable from each other?"

The above-mentioned questions have been studied from different perspectives, in the chapters on language universals, linguistic typology, language families and language contact. The chapter on language variation moves the focus from inter-language to intra-language comparison. Finally, the chapter on writing discusses similarities and differences in the ways in which various cultures have used a visual medium to represent and augment the auditory signals of speech.

### **4. Conclusion**

In the context of Bangladesh, gender variation in language use has become a very common issue in everyday discourses of our socio-cultural life. While using language frequently, one's speech pattern differs from that of another and, such differences basically occur among male and female. Nowadays, a variety of language uses are occurring mostly among the young people of Bangladesh. This paper may help to examine the common differences and reasons behind variation of language use among the undergraduate students of Bangladesh to find out the multiple reasons behind the variation of language use between male and female.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### **References**

- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.

- Cameron, D. (2008). *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Coates, J. (1987). Epistemic Modality and Spoken Discourse: Transactions of the Philological Society. *Academia*, 85, 110-131.  
[http://www.academia.edu/7231856/EPISTEMIC\\_MODALITY\\_AND\\_SPOKEN\\_DISCOURSE](http://www.academia.edu/7231856/EPISTEMIC_MODALITY_AND_SPOKEN_DISCOURSE)  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-968X.1987.tb00714.x>
- Coates, J. (1994). No Gap, Lots of Overlap: Turn-Taking Patterns in the Talk of Women Friends. In D. Graddol, J. Maybin, & B. Stiever (Eds.), *Researching Language and Literacy in Social Context*. Frankfurt Lodge, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Coates, J. (2016). *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Sex Differences in Language* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645612>
- Deuchar, M. (1988). A Pragmatic Account of Women's Use of Standard Speech. In J. Coates, & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Women in Their Speech Communities* (pp. 27-32). London: Longman.
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1999). New Generalizations and Explanations in Language and Gender Research. *Language in Society*, 28, 185-201.  
<https://web.stanford.edu/~eckert/PDF/LinS1999.pdf>  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404599002031>
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003). *Language and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791147>
- Edelsky, C. (1981). Who's Got the Floor? *Language in Society*, 10, 383-421.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S004740450000885X>
- Fishman, P. (1980). Conversational Insecurity. In H. Giles, W. P. Robinson, & P. M. Smith (Eds.), *Language: Social Psychological Perspectives*. England, United Kingdom: Pergamon Press Ltd.
- Freeman, R., & Mc Elhinny, B. (1996). Language and Gender. In S. McKay, & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching* (pp. 218-280). Cambridge: CUP. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511551185.011>
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*.
- Goodwin, M. (1998). Cooperation and Competition across Girls' Play Activities. In J. Coates (Ed.), *Language and Gender: A Reader* (pp. 121-146). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Henley, N. M., & Kramarae, C. (1991). Gender, Power, and Miscommunication. In N. Coupland, H. Giles, & J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), *"Miscommunication" and Problematic Talk* (pp. 18-43). New York: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Holmes, J. (1984). Women's Language: A Functional Approach. *General Linguistics*, 24, 149-178.
- Humm, M. (2003). *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (2nd ed.). London: Edinburg University Press.
- Jaggar, A. M. (1983). *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld.
- Lakoff, R. T. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Maltz, D., & Borker, R. (1982). A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication. In J. J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and Social Identity* (pp. 197-216). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620836.013>
- Ochs, E. (1993). Constructing Social Identity: A Language Socialization Perspective. *Re-*

*search on Language and Social Interaction*, 26, 287-306.

[https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327973rlsi2603\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327973rlsi2603_3)

Sunderland, J. (2004). *Gendered Discourse*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230505582>

Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: William Morrow.

Uchida, A. (1998). When Differences Is Dominance: A Critique of the Anti-Power Based Cultural Approach to Sex Differences. In D. Cameron (Ed.), *The Feminist Critique of Language*. Canada: Routledge.

West, C., & Zimmermann, D. (1987). Doing Gender. In *Gender and Society* (pp. 125-151). London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>