

Observing cross-gender communication

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Firstly, I would like to appreciate Robin Lakoff who had actually spent quality time in observing women's language and having documented it as a treatise titled "Language and Woman's place". Having said that, I do have my disagreements with the outright stereotyping of language based on gender. The book suggests certain basic assumptions about the language of a woman, and I would like to go ahead and make it clear, in the beginning of the essay that I am not convinced with most of these arguments, atleast personally.

Some of my apprehensions were real as I spent talking to people and observing people talk at Nick and Dora's party on Saturday. It was a very real life situation. I also managed to grab two friends, one male and one female, talking to each other on the C 62 bus to Langley another day. So based on these conversations, and also several other instances, I would like to rephrase or correct certain assumptions, and also, agree to some of them.

The first setting was at Nick and Dora's party. It was one of those perfect social settings for cross-gender communication analysis. As I keenly observed some of the speakers talk to each other, being fellow classmates with the same assignments, they did manage to understand that I was observing them without pen or paper and so threw in a couple of expressions that they considered to be womanly. However, I did notice a number of expressions that were used by men. The most prominent ones amongst them being:

- “I am so glad that you came” which Nick said as I entered his party.
- Lots of empty adjectives such as ‘Amazing’, ‘Wow’, ‘Great’, etc.
- Usage of the expression “I think that....”
- Use of question tags such as “You have done your assignment, haven’t you?”

Now, focusing on the actual claims made by the author:

Hedge words: I noticed that there was not the slightest hesitation in using them. Men used it freely and although they avoided the more ‘effeminate’ or ‘womanly’ expressions like ‘lovely’ or ‘divine’, they did have perfect unisex equivalents like ‘amazing’ or ‘wow’ which were used by people from both genders. It is also to be noted that words such as ‘lovely’, ‘divine’, or ‘pristine’ aren’t used as expressions even by women. So I think that hedge words have evolved to become unisex words that can be used in any setting without being considered out-of-gender or as predominantly ‘male’ or ‘female’ expressions.

Polite forms: I just do not understand as to why someone would consider politeness to be only a feminine aspect. I have noticed men in Wal-Mart, while standing in the line using ‘Would you mind if I.....’ and also the term ‘...If you don’t mind...’ and I do not see it to be gender oriented politeness either. I have encountered such polite phrases being used by men. In the service industry, especially the call centre industry in India, men are taught these polite terms as a part of cross-cultural sensitivity lessons. I, for one, use terms using ‘mind’, ‘appreciate’.

Tag questions: Usage of question tags are considered to be the more correct form of English as per standard rules. British English uses question tags heavily and this can be understood easily by looking at movies such as 'My Fair Lady'. British English uses question tags as a completely unisex feature of the language. It is also to be noted that question tags are not prominent amongst only the women but amongst people who prefer talking in a more standardized version.

Overuse qualifiers: Usages such as 'I think that' are very common amongst Indian English speakers and I have noticed that even here. These terms do not convey a gender oriented meaning and are not as much as terms like, 'my dimple hurt', but only conveys the fact that the speaker, male or female, wants to convey one's viewpoint without being committal about the fact that is being conveyed.

Special Lexicon: I do agree with Lakoff in this regard since women do use more colors to describe things by adding qualifiers or adjectives to colors. For example, in India, since Silk Sarees are very popular amongst women, they are sold in big numbers. It is very interesting to watch them describe the colors when picking their sarees. They use terms such as 'parrot green', 'ink blue', 'cream-white' and all of these are generally more descriptive than the terms used by the men.

Hypercorrect grammar or enunciation: This is also a feature that is very prominent amongst British English speakers as clear enunciation and grammar is expected from

speakers of both genders. So this cannot be quantified to be something that belongs to only the female gender. Intonation, however, is something that would be more prominent amongst female speakers.

I would like to conclude this essay by saying that Robin Lakoff's work cannot be used as a hard-and-fast thumb rule for quantifying language variations based on gender. Some of them do stand valid till date, however, most of the assumption claims are not true as the meanings, usages and general trends have changed in the last 25 years. So Lakoff's work cannot be disregarded altogether and at the same time cannot be used as a set standard for quantifying speech patterns as the work tends to be more stereotypical, than analytical.

Bibliography:

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