

The Study of Gender Differences in the Use of Linguistic Forms in the Speech of Iranian Men and Women: A Comparative Study of Persian and English

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Abstract

This research intended to determine whether English and Persian men and women were different with respect to the use of intensifiers, hedges and tag questions. To conduct the study, R. Lakoff's (1975) ideas concerning linguistic differences between males and females were taken into account. In order to gather the most natural-like data, 6 English and 8 Persian film-scripts with a family and social theme were randomly selected from amongst all the scenarios available in two libraries of Shiraz University. In all, 9280 utterances were studied. The data were then divided into four major groups: (1) cross sex, same culture, (2) same sex, cross culture, (3) cross sex, cross culture and (4) cross culture data. The results of the 21 Chi-squares computed showed no significant difference between the groups on the use of intensifiers, hedged and tag questions. The findings of the study strongly rejected Lakoff's opinion

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regarding gender-bound language at least in the three areas inspected in this research.

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1- Introduction

From childhood males and females are different in many ways, both physiologically and psychologically. In a research carried out at York University in Canada regarding the memory of males and females, females did better. Eisenmen (1997) claims that women, in comparison with men, have a better memory while in another study carried out by Eesenmen (1997) men were quite accurate in maintaining a sense of direction but women were not. This is consistent with the claim that men tend to do better on visual-spatial tests and in mathematics than women do.

There also exist social differences between men and women. Two of the most demanding theories on social differences found between males and females are “*difference theory*” and “*dominance theory*”. According to difference theory men and women live in different or separate cultural worlds and, as a result, they promote different ways of speaking (Uchida: 1992). That is why this theory is sometimes

called "*two-culture theory*". So in this theory, cross-sex communication is cross-cultural communication.

In dominance theory, men and women inhabit in a cultural and linguistic world, where power and status are distributed unequally. In this theory, also called power-based theory, the focus is on male dominance and sexual division.

2- Gender-Bound Language

Although men and women, from a given social class, belong to the same speech community, they use different linguistic forms. The linguistic forms used by women and men contrast to some degree in all speech communities. For example, Holmes (1993) mentions the Amazon Indians' language as an extreme example, where the language used by a child's mother is different from that used by her father and each tribe is distinguished by a different language. In this community, males and females speak different languages.

Less dramatically, there are communities where men and women speak the same language, but some distinct linguistic features occur in the speech of women and men. These differences range from pronunciation or morphology to vocabulary. Holmes (1993) refers to Japanese, where different words, with the same meaning, are used by men and women distinctively. For example, in this language when a woman

wants to say 'water', she uses the word 'ohiya' whereas a man uses the word 'miza'.

Furthermore, women tend to use the standard language more than men do. Climate (1997) states that men and women may speak differently. He believes that females generally use speech to develop and maintain relationships. They use language to achieve intimacy.

3- A Brief Review of Works on Gender-Bound Language

The investigation and identification of differences between men's and women's speech date back to many years ago. Until 1944, no specific piece of writing on gender differences in language appeared. As cited in Grey (1998), Clarke Stewart worked on language acquisition and gender variation and from that time the comparison between female cooperativeness and male competitiveness in linguistic behavior began.

From among these researchers, Lakoff (1975) proposed theories on the existence of women's language. Her book '*Language and Woman's Place*' has served as a basis for much research on the subject. She mentions ten features for women's language. As cited in Holmes (1993: 314), these ten features are as follows:

1. Lexical hedges or fillers, e.g. you know, sort of, ...
2. Tag questions, e.g. she is very nice, isn't she?

3. Rising intonation on declaratives, e.g. it's really good.
4. Empty adjectives, e.g. divine, charming, cute.
5. Precise color terms, e.g. magenta, acqamarine.
6. Intensifiers such as just and so.
7. Hypercorrect grammar, e.g. consistent use of standard verb forms.
8. Superpolite forms, e.g. indirect requests, euphemisms.
9. Avoidance of strong swear words, e.g. fudge, my goodness.
10. Emphatic stress, e.g. it was a BRILLIANT performance.

Lakoff's hypotheses have both cons and pros. Men's language as put by Lakoff is assertive, adult, and direct, while women's language is immature, hyperformal or hyperpolite and non-assertive. Lakoff believes that the use of tag questions by women is the sign of uncertainty. Dubois and Crouch (1975) launched a severe attack on Lakoff's claims, especially on tag questions. They examined the use of tag questions within the context of a professional meeting and concluded that at least in that context, males used tag questions more than females did. Their conclusion was that Lakoff's hypothesis might be biased in favor of highly stereotyping beliefs or folk linguistics.

Dubois and Crouch (1975) question Lakoff's findings as Lakoff had used introspective methods in her study. They argued that her conclusions were made on uncontrolled and unverifiable observation of others and were based on highly skewed and non-random sample of people.

To examine Lakoff's hypothesis, the researcher selected three grammatical categories, from the above list, namely tag questions, hedges and intensifiers as the basis of the analysis. Then, the following research question was taken into account. *Do English and Persian women use intensifier, tag and hedge more than men do?*

3. Materials of the Study

To carry out the investigation, the researcher made use of 6 English scenarios, (1) Out of Sight, (2) Taxi Driver, (3) American Beauty, (4) China Town, (5) My Beautiful Launderette, (6) Blood Simple and 8 Persian scenarios, (1) *æz kærxe ta rain* (From Karkheh to Rine), (2) *sib* (The Apple), (3) *bæččehaye aseman* (Children of the Heaven), (4) *ejare neshinha* (The Tenents), (5) *otobus* (The Bus), (6) *nun o goldun* (Bread and vase), (7) *ærusi-ye xuban* (The Wedding of the Nice People) and (8) *sæbe sæmur* (The Sable's Night). The researcher made use of scenarios so as to get to results, which could closely represent the linguistic performance of ordinary people in natural situations. In her study, she believed that data

extracted from scenarios were very close, if not exactly the same, to the natural data.

Furthermore, poems were not used, since they were considered to be quite different from the ordinary language especially with respect to structure and sequences of elements.

The above-mentioned Persian scenarios were selected in the following way. First, all the scenarios, with a family and social theme, were listed. They were available in Mirza-ye Shirazi Library as well as in the Regional Library of Science and Technology both located in Shiraz, Iran. Then, 8 Persian scenarios were randomly selected. With respect to the English scenarios, the books with themes quite close to or equivalent with those of the Persian scenarios were selected. For example, the theme and the style of writing in *Taxi 'Driver'* and *'Otubus'* are very similar, if not exactly the same. Moreover, in order to make the study as reliable as possible two tests of reliability namely inter-rater and intra-rater reliability were used.

4- Data Collection Procedures

To collect the relevant data, the investigator first read all the Farsi and English scenarios with great care. Then, the total number of utterances in each book was counted. Later, the utterances were divided into two parts, those produced by

females and those produced by males. This information is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Frequency of Intensifiers, Hedges and Tags as Produced by English and Persian Males and Females.

English		Persian		
Male (U=2827)	Female (U=1306)	Male (U=3781)	Female (U=1366)	
I	110 (3.89%)	78 (5.97%)	110 (2.9%)	74 (5.4%)
H	150 (5.3%)	77 (5.89%)	72 (1.9%)	68 (4.9%)
T	44 (1.55%)	8 (0.61%)	9 (0.23%)	9 (0.65%)

I= Intensifier, H= Hedge, T= Tag, U= Utterance

In this study, utterance was used as the unit of speech, since there were quite a number of cases in Persian scenarios where a sentence did not end in a full stop but in a comma. Or, there were cases where two or three sentences were combined using a conjunction like 'and'. Furthermore, the definition of sentence was quite vague and, thus, not suitable for doing a comparative study between two languages. For these reasons, the researcher considered 'utterance' to be a better device to pursue a comparative study.

5. Scope of the Study

This part of analysis is meant to be after Lakoff who put forward ten elements showing lack of confidence and tentativeness in the speech of women. Some of these items were related to the domain of phonetics such as rising and falling intonation. Collecting data concerning pitch and intonation as well as a discussion of hypercorrect grammar and super polite forms were not only difficult to handle but also of little significance taken the research questions put by the researcher.

What the researcher had first in mind was to include swear words as well. But, this category was taken out from the final analysis since the use made by people of these words was dependent on many variables, such as the status of the speaker, the status of the listener, their sex, etc. If swear words were included in this study, the results would not be reliable.

It was planned to look for empty adjectives as well but unfortunately not a single example of this was found in the total corpus. For this reason, the researcher excluded the discussion of this category as well as that of the swear words. This left her with only three grammatical categories namely, 'tag questions', 'hedges' and 'intensifiers', which were used by the researcher as the basis of analysis.

6- Data Analysis

To analyze the data in this study, the researcher made use of frequency counts and Chi-square statistical procedures. Frequency counts were used to show the frequency of 'intensifiers', 'hedges', and 'tag questions' as found in the utterances produced by English and Iranian males and females.

Also, the researcher took advantage of percentage figures to show the distribution of each linguistic item within and between groups. Finally, she made use of Chi-square to find out whether the differences were meaningful and significant or not.

7- Findings and Results

The results of the data analysis will be presented in four parts. In the first part, comparisons are made between cross sex, same culture data, i. e. between Iranian males and females or between English males and females. The second part deals with same sex, cross culture data. Here, comparisons are made between English and Persian males or between English and Persian females. Later, cross sex, cross culture data will be dealt with. In this part, comparisons are made between English males and Persian females as well as English females and Persian males and finally in the fourth part comparisons are made between all English participants and all Persian

participants with respect to the use of intensifiers, tag questions and hedges.

7-1 Statistics on Cross Sex, Same Culture Data

Table 2 summarizes the results of six comparisons made between Iranian males and females and English males and females regarding the use of tag questions, hedges and intensifiers. As shown in the table, none of the six Chi-squares computed can reject the null-hypothesis. This shows that there is no difference between English males and females with regard to the use of the three linguistic categories mentioned above. Similar results were found concerning Persian males and females.

Table 2: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Cross Sex, Same Culture Data

	Cross sex, same culture			
	English		Persian	
	Male/Female		Male/Female	
I	X= 0.43	NS	X= 0.75	NS
H	X= 0.03	NS	X= 1.32	NS
T	X= 0.4	NS	X= 0.2	NS

NS= Not Significant P> 0.05

7-2 Statistics on Same Sex, Cross Culture Data

In this part, the main purpose of the researcher was to find out if English and Persian males or English and Persian females used intensifiers, hedges and tag questions differently.

Table 3: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Same Sex, Cross Culture Data

	Same sex, Cross culture			
	Male		Female	
	English/Persian		English/Persian	
I	X= 0.14	NS	X= 0.02	NS
H	X= 1.6	NS	X= 0.09	NS
T	X= 0.97	NS	X= 0.001	NS

NS= Not Significant P > 0.05

As shown in Table 3, the hypothesis of no difference cannot be rejected concerning English and Persian males, nor can it be rejected regarding English and Persian females. This indicates that language is not a contributing factor in using the above grammatical categories.

7-3 Statistics on Cross Sex, Cross Culture Data

In this section, the main objective was to see if there could be found any significant difference between English males and Persian females or between English females and Persian males

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 with regard to the use they made of intensifiers, tag questions and hedges.

Table 4: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Cross Sex, Cross Culture Data

	Cross sex, Cross culture			
	English Males/		English Females/	
	Persian Female		Persian Males	
I	X= 0.25	NS	X= 1.06	NS
H	X= 0.02	NS	X= 2.04	NS
T	X= 0.02	NS	X= 0.18	NS

NS= Not Significant P> 0.05

The results of the Chi-squares in the above table are indicative of the fact that like what was found in Tables 2 and 3, the difference found between the groups under study is not great enough to reject the null-hypothesis. This shows that even when we make comparisons while taking into account the two criteria of gender and language, again the two groups perform similarly.

7-4 Statistics on Cross Culture Data

In this closing section, we will compare the whole English data with the whole Persian data. The results have been summarized in Table 5 below:

Table 5: The Results of the Chi-squares as Computed for Cross Culture Data

	Cross culture	
	English Male & Female/	Persian Male & Female
I	X= 0.134	NS
H	X= 1.07	NS
T	X= 0.539	NS

NS= Not Significant P> 0.05

Again, The Chi-squares computed in Table 5 prove that there is no significant difference between the two groups of English males & females and Persian males and females. This finding, like what was found in the previous tables, is not in line with the ideas put by Lakoff concerning linguistic differences between the two genders.

8- Discussion and Conclusions

As we mentioned before, Robin Lakoff has put forward the most complete analysis concerning linguistic differences between males and females. She believes that sex differences in language usage reflect different and unequal roles and status. She proposes that because of the low status of women and the social pressure on them to talk like a lady, women tend to use more hedges, intensifiers, super polite forms, question intonations, etc. more than men do.

Based on the results obtained in this study, Lakoff's ideas concerning tag questions, hedges and intensifiers cannot be held.

In Lakoff's opinion, the functions of tag questions are two-fold: they soften the impact of assertions and they express uncertainty. If we accept this idea, we must accept that women are usually uncertain creatures, but for two reasons Lakoff's ideas can be rejected: (1) Lakoff made these ground-breaking ideas based on her intuition. In fact, she did not conduct a scientific research. (2) Other researchers did not confirm what Lakoff had proposed. For example, Holmes (1993) found out that certain types of tag question are used more by men than by women, i.e. modal tags, and certain other types are used more by women, i.e. facilitative tags.

Holmes states that facilitative tags are addressee-oriented, expressing the speaker's solidarity or positive attitude to the addressee. On the contrary, modal tags are speaker-oriented and signal speaker's desire for confirmation. Furthermore, in a research carried out by Cameron et. al., (1998), it was found that men used more facilitative and modal tags than women did. But, as was mentioned before, the Chi-squares computed in Section 7 of this paper revealed no significant difference between males and females with regard to the use of tag questions.

Lakoff also believes that women use more hedges than men. She identified three types of hedges as follows: those showing that the speaker is unsure; those used for the sake of politeness and finally those characterizing women's language, the language of those who are out of power in society. But, like what was found concerning tag questions in this study, again Lakoff's ideas concerning hedges cannot be held.

The Chi-squares computed in this study confirmed no significant difference between males and females with regard to the use of hedges. This finding is in line with what Holmes (1986) found concerning the use of '*you know*' in the speech of men and women. Holmes did not find any significant differences between the two genders.

Similarly, what was found concerning intensifiers, in this research, did not confirm Lakoff's ideas. No significant difference was found between the groups under study with regard to the use of intensifiers.

In this study, none of Lakoff's assumptions concerning hedges, tag questions and intensifiers were accepted.

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