

Gender as Represented by Language Used in Computer-Mediated Communication

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ABSTRACT

Early gender theorists developed frameworks for identifying (two) different genders in communication. These early studies were based on face-to-face communication. In contrast, my empirical case study is aimed at investigating whether the above frameworks are still applicable today, especially with reference to computer-mediated communication (CMC), where the visual and auditory cues are absent. This study specifically focuses on interactions among young Southern Africans and tests whether the characteristics identified as key elements in the above frameworks are relevant in CMC. Therefore, in my paper, I describe and use traditional frameworks on my data and subsequently describe and apply more recent gender theories, which I found to be more compatible with my data.

INTRODUCTION

Dialogue X*

18. *<LOADED> all we have been chatin to might gals
24. <LOADED> they are chics
28. <Q> They were Def chicks
62. <LOADED> where you from bru
63. <LOADED> you plee of origin
66. <Q> Botswana
67. <Q> and u
68. <LOADED> LESOTHO
69. <Q> So o a bua
70. <LOADED> sure ntate or ra
71. <Q> How is varsity treating u
72. <Q> Shit is tight
73. <LOADED> its cool bru but three much reading

Dialogue Y

10. <muscles> tinkie is so friendly
12. <HAPPY> I know
13. <Tinkie> Is that because my name sounds soft and cuddly?
14. <muscles> coz u greet everyone
54. <Tinkie> My aunt is having her third child.
57. <HAPPY> when, im impressed
61. <Tinkie> She'll be having her in a month.
58. <Tinkie> I couldn't believe it because I wouldn't know how I'd feed a child in these conditions.
59. conditions.
60. <HAPPY> i can't wait to hold mine in my hands
62. <HAPPY> i mean in 6 yrs maybe
64. <Tinkie> I'm looking at six or seven years from now.
63. <muscles> i dont want any kids
65. <Tinkie> Really, muscles?
66. <Tinkie> Why not?
69. <muscles> we are over populated as it is
73. <muscles> we need to adopt kids instead

Looking at the two extracts of conversation given above, few readers would fail to recognise that the participants in the first dialogue are not of the same gender as those in the second one. The stereotypical characteristics of the conversations make it almost obvious that the interaction on the left took place between males and the one on the right between females. In line with the discoveries of early gender theorists such as D. Tannen, R. Lakoff, D. Zimmerman and C. West, the conversation between the males is more centred around facts and issues instead of a personally orientated topic and self-disclosure such as is displayed in the females' interaction. The conversation on the right displays more features of conversational support with the example of Muscles' starting off by complementing Tinkie by referring to her as friendly. Such displays of mutual support and co-operation are not seen in the conversation between the men, instead what we do see is some profanity when Q tells Loaded that "Shit is tight." Though some of the women do show some level of assertion, we cannot help but compare Q's very assertive statement, "They were Def[inately] chicks," to Happy's heavily attenuated comment, "I mean in 6 years maybe." And, of course, the males' use of words such as 'chicks' and 'bru,' a colloquial South African word equivalent to the American term, 'dog,' used to mean brother or friend, are a dead give-away of their gender.

* The reason why the lines in these extracts are not consecutively numbered is because I have rearranged the order of the lines so as to make it easier to understand and follow the conversation.

* Parts between < ... > are the chat participants' pseudonyms. Numbering is automatic by line of point not speaker turn.

'Typical', is what one may be tempted to call these examples of male and female conversation styles. However, modern gender theories such as those of D. Cameron and D. Kulick problematise the earlier model of gender classification referred to above. And contrary to the impression created by the extracts from conversations X and Y, my empirical study suggested that the later theorists were correct and the ideas of the earlier ones questionable, at the very least. In my data, the two interactions, X and Y, quoted above are by no means typical. Other dialogues, especially those in which both sexes were involved, proved far less stereotypical than the early theorists might have led us to believe. Most of my data did not show a binary system of gender classification (that is, a system whereby one can be classified as being either of masculine or feminine gender) but suggested, rather, that gender is more performative and constructive than static. That is, "performing masculinity or femininity 'appropriately' cannot mean giving exactly the same performance regardless of circumstances...it may involve different strategies in mixed- and single-sex company, in private and in public settings, in various social positions (parent, lover, professional, friend) that someone might regularly occupy in the course of everyday life" (Cameron, 1996: 60). As Michelle Rodino put it, in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) context, "One may knock on a door like a woman and enter a room like a woman, but to continue to appear as a woman, one must continue displaying cues that signify woman" (Rodino, n.d.). This is especially true in CMC where the visual and auditory cues are absent. My findings showed that no one 'knocked at the door, walked into the room and continued to display cues signifying one gender,' in terms of the binary classification, throughout any interaction.

The reality is that representations of gender and identity are fast changing in the society we live in. This we see every day with women taking on what were stereotypically masculine attitudes, roles and jobs and men being more accepting of their "feminine" sides by embracing what were stereotypically feminine emotions. More and more language and gender stereotypes seem to be becoming inapplicable and even impertinent¹ to the men and women of today. This brings to the fore the necessity to re-evaluate traditional identity models and stereotypes and makes it "desirable to reformulate notions such as 'women's language' or 'men's style'" (Cameron, 1995: 43) to make them more accommodating of the changes taking place in society.

Furthermore, the dawn of the internet and the controversies it presents adds to this need for re-evaluation. Because "[t]he Internet creates a *crisis of boundaries* between the real and the virtual, between time zones and between spaces, near and distant [and] [a]bove all, boundaries between bodies and technologies, between our sense of self and our sense of our changing roles" (Shields, 1996: 7) it provides the perfect playground for us to experiment with different theories on gender and other aspects of our identities.

Most of us are aware of the predictions made about how the internet would affect communication. Several people predicted that the anonymity offered by on-line environments would almost obliterate identity distinctions which seem to lead to prejudice and judgement in real life. They suggested that "on the Internet, boundaries – temporal, spatial, associative and identity-forming – all dissolve" (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996: 99). And some went as far as to suggest that on the internet "[t]he contained, the distinct, the separate – are being replaced by the flowing, the unified, the fused" (Shields, 1996: 5). Nguyen and Alexander asserted that "[u]nder power's endless refraction within the new electronic dispensation, old assumptions about the nature of identity have quietly vanished" (1996: 104). They suggested that on the internet "[o]ur individual concreteness dissolves in favour of the fluid, the homogeneous and the universal. Once the palpable particularity of individual identity is lost, we become relational feedback units among endless arrays of refracted power" (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996: 104). The fact that experience has proved this not to be completely true creates room for further investigation, further necessitating reform in academic assumptions and practices in regard to such fields as sociolinguistics and ethnology.

Therefore, in this paper, I explore the ways in which traditional ideas of how different genders communicate have been affected, challenged and even changed by CMC. To contextualise my own study, I give a broad outline of developments in language and gender theory and related research conducted on language and gender as affected by the dawn of the internet. Thereafter I give an account of the findings in my case study and compare them to the discoveries of previous researchers.

¹ This is shown by several participants' responses to stereotypes made about their genders and even the opposite gender(s). An example is Notredame's comment in chat A3, "Jaguar's comment is semi-judgemental" (line 216) and his taking offence to Jaguar's assertion that he talked too much in line 205.

BACKGROUND AND GENERAL CONTEXT

Definition

I found that in my data gender was extremely difficult to pinpoint. That it is not easy to define is also shown by the fact that after more than three decades of trying to pin it down, there is still no one definition which can be said to appropriately and correctly explain it and model exactly how it is to be identified. Despite the difficulty in pinpointing a single definition of gender, the definition I find useful is that of Kay McCormick:

[T]he term 'gender' does not refer to 'grammatical gender' (the system to be found in some languages of organising certain word classes into contrasting categories of 'masculine,' 'feminine,' 'neuter'). Here gender refers to social categories based on sex but encompassing behaviour, roles, and images that although not biologically determined, are regarded by a society as appropriate to its male or female members. What is seen as appropriate to each gender thus differs in different societies and eras. Gender is distinguished from 'sex' in that sex is taken to refer to biological characteristics of male and female whereas gender encompasses what is socially learned and acquired. (McCormick, 1994: 317).

Language and Gender Off-line

According to Deborah Cameron, beginning from around 1973 sociolinguistic theories relating to gender can generally be said to fall under three particular approaches: the *deficit* model, the *dominance* model and the *cultural difference* model (Cameron, 1995: 33). She describes these three approaches thus: in the *deficit* model early socialisation is explained as being the reason why women are disadvantaged speakers in communication, especially in mixed-sex interactions. In the *dominance* model "women are seen, often through an ethnomethodological frame, as negotiating their relatively powerless position in interacting with men: male social privilege is made manifest in recurrent patterns of language use" (Cameron, 1995: 33). And, in the *cultural difference* model, the model which dominated in the 1980s, women and men's "segregation... during childhood and adolescence" (Cameron, 1995: 33) is shown to be responsible for the sexes' differences in "conversational goals and styles" (Cameron, 1995: 33).

The above approaches are signified in the works of theorists such as R. Lakoff, D. Zimmerman, C. West, and

D. Tannen² (Cameron, 1995: 33). The conclusions they reached were, at the time, very definite: in Deborah Tannen's words, "men do not do 'women's talk' because they simply *do not know how*" (Cameron, 1996: 60). And, of course, in the early theorists' perceptions, the opposite was also true. Women's and men's language was polarised: hence the "facilitative/controlling, rapport/report, and personal/authoritative" (Rodino, n.d.) binaries.

Though the departure point of linguistic study has always been that "all varieties are equal" (Cameron, 1995: 35), this has not always been the impression given by the models of language and gender produced by language theorists. Women have been said to "use 'better' speech [than men] as a means of gaining entry into a social group of higher status" (McCormick, 1994: 319). Thus the comparison is made between women's use of polite, refined language and more prestigious variants of pronunciation and men's use of more taboo language, expletives and more working class speech patterns (De Klerk, 1996: 157; McCormick, 1994: 318 – 319; Coates, 1986: 97). An example of this is provided by Q's expression "Shit is tight." This was in extract X taken from the men's conversation and quoted in the introduction. Women are said to use more descriptive language while men tend to have a limited descriptive vocabulary. And it is said that women pay more compliments than men do—this was shown in extract Y of the women's conversation quoted in the introduction. In single-sex conversations, women have been shown to prefer personal topics while men prefer public issues. Women also tend to use more emotional language, describing and discussing their feelings, and give more personally orientated responses, revealing thoughts and feelings, while men speak more matter-of-factly and use authoritative language. Women seem to have a more co-operative style of conversation, tending to show greater conversational support by use of 'minimal responses' such as 'yeah', 'mhm' and 'right' and by asking questions and addressing other participants by name (Cameron, 1996: 231; Coates, 1986: 97 & 117). On the other hand, men tend to display a more competitive and adversarial style of conversation. In mixed-sex conversations evidence contradicting the stereotype that "women are constitutionally verbose" (McCormick, 1994: 320) is produced as men are shown to dominate conversation by having longer turns and often being the ones to introduce new topics which are taken up and developed (McCormick, 1994: 320; Coates, 1986: 117). Men's displays of greater verbal aggression, interrupting more often than women, making stronger and more contentious assertions and criticising and

² From this point onwards I shall refer to these theorists as 'the early theorists.'

ridiculing others more, are contrasted with women's tendency to display more features of attenuation such as hedging, apologising and using tag questions rather than making assertions (Cameron, 2000: 231; Coates, 1986: 117).

Tannen says that it is "because girls and boys grow up in what are essentially different cultures [that] talk between men and women is cross-cultural communication" (Rodino, n.d.). But, if language and gender is as clear-cut as the early theorists make it seem men and women would have to, as Cameron suggests, "live on different planets" (Cameron, 1996: 60). Thus it is clear that "representing male and female language as a binary and using other dichotomous categories to describe language overlook (sic) complexities in actual speech" (Rodino, n.d.). And this is exactly what the most modern of language and gender theorists conclude: gender cannot be defined in terms of binary categories because context and other social identity signifiers contribute to the construction of gender, thus meaning that gender is not static but constructive and performative. Deborah Cameron sums this approach up best: "if I talk like a woman this is not just the inevitable outcome of the fact that I am a woman; it is one way I have of becoming a woman, producing myself *as* one" (Cameron, 1995: 43).

What the early theorists ignored in their research and theories is the fluidity of language and gender. As Don Kulick observes, "...gender has a strong tendency to be analysed in terms of mutually exclusive identity categories (namely 'man' and 'woman')" (Kulick, 2000: 270) but, as he and Cameron and several other modern linguists seem to agree, masculinity and femininity are not "monolithic constructs, automatically giving rise to predictable and utterly different patterns of verbal interaction" (Cameron, 1996: 62). It is completely possible for a person to give female signals or use female indicators and still not be female and, in terms of Darsey's theorem applied by Kulick in his article, "Gay and Lesbian Language", 'the fact that males do X does not make X male' (Kulick, 2000: 259). Co-operative speech cannot be characterised as 'female speech' unless it can be proved that it is unique to females, which it obviously is not because many males use co-operative speech patterns. In fact, Hewitt goes as far as to say that all speech is co-operative to some extent, whether between males or females, because "the declarative 'I' and the co-ordinative 'we' are simultaneously valid for any group exchange, irrespective of the gender of its participants" (Meinhof & Johnson, 1996: 3). He too thus problematises gender bifurcation.

Language and Gender On-line

Sociolinguistic studies of gendered language on the internet have been intricately involved with and connected to those off-line. Though studies which took place in the 1970s through the early 1990s focussed on how men and women differ in speech patterns and language use in face-to-face (FTF) interactions, conclusions reached there have proved very useful in research done on language and gender in CMC. As this is a well documented area of linguistic research, early studies—and by early I mean in the very late 80s and early 90s—done on how language and gender are represented on the internet used the early theories dealt with in detail in the previous section as a basis and support for their research.

Many theories and studies in a variety of disciplines have dealt with how the internet would affect perceptions of identity and the ways in which it is formed. The majority of these theories, most of which made big claims on how communication would change in the future, were produced in the late 80s and early 90s by theorists such as S. Turkle, M. Taylor and E. Saarinen. Their predictions can basically be summarised thus: "[i]n allowing interaction at a distance, the computer [has] negated the limitations of physical presence..." (Shields, 1996: 5). They asserted that "[o]n the internet, boundaries – temporal, spatial and identity-forming – all dissolve..." (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996: 104) and gender, race and class distinctions are erased because, "unless you choose to disclose it, no one else knows whether you are male, female, tall, short, a redhead or blond, black, white or Asian, Latino, in a wheelchair or not" (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996: 104) and we are thus enabled to have community discourse free of prejudice.

While the above theory is very optimistic, it is extremely idealistic and this was heavily criticised by contemporary and later theorists who have published works within the last five to ten years and found that, just as the early linguistic theories were misleadingly conclusive and came to be disproved by further research, so were those of the earlier theorists on language and identity on the net. They found that gender, race and class identities are not escaped but re-inscribed online. Their propositions were not free of idealism either, though, for some went as far as to suggest that "cyberspace is a...diverse and polymorphous reality, in which computer technology mediates practically every human action, speech, even thought" (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996: 100). This, of course, is not true as the absence of visual and auditory cues, which creates difficulty

in fully comprehending the intention behind an utterance, shows that the internet cannot, as yet, recreate reality in its entirety. The inability to determine tone and identify or differentiate between dramatic and uncomfortable pauses means that CMC is not a complete reconstruction and duplication of reality. But seemingly, the correct view is that,

the internet is a network linking interactants across space and time, not a 'thing' or a set of computers communicating autonomously without human actors...[and], the amoral quality of Net ethics throws into question essentialized identities and dualistic sexual categories in which male and female are the unquestioned alpha and omega of sexuality. (Shields, 1996: 8 - 9)

The same can be said of gender.

With regard to linguistic representations of gender on the internet, most of the more recent research indicates broad agreement that gender distinctions are not neutralised by CMC, but the degrees of their assertions varied. Some researchers asserted that "women and men have recognisably different styles in posting to the internet...[and] that women and men have different communicative ethics – that is, they value different kinds of online interactions as appropriate and desirable" (Herring, 1994), showing consistency with the assertions of linguistic theorists such as Deborah Tannen. And others suggested that the net simply provides a platform where men, and especially women, can begin to break free from stereotypes and gender expectations. Elizabeth Lawley suggests that "the world of (and the worlds created by) technology need not only reflect current gender categories; instead they can become another arena for the reshaping of those categories" (Lawley, 1993). And I would say 'reshaping' is the key word in that sentence.

Online, women and men do sometimes show the stereotypical features of conversation, but more often than not, they break out of the boundaries, or as Michelle Rodino words it, "break out of the binaries" (Rodino, n.d.). On Yahoo chat the first thing people ask is 'a/s/l' which stands for age, sex and location. As Katie Argyle and Rob Shields suggest "the need for face-to-face contact suggests that the body...is a central stake in our, so-called, virtual neighbourhoods" (Argyle & Shields, 1996: 68) i.e. we do not shake off our identity just by logging into an internet chat room. Binch showed this when, in one of the chat sessions I conducted, he first suggested that everyone meet in person after the chat session and then later informed the other

participants that if they were to see him in real life they would run away due to disbelief that it was him. Goose made a similar comment when, in an earlier chat session, he said, "u couldn't miss me in real life." People seem somewhat unable to let go of reality online. In fact, it has been suggested that virtual reality is not an escape from reality but "provide[s] an alternative reality, where 'being' somewhere does not require physical presence and 'doing' something does not result in any change in the physical world" (Springer, 1996: 314). But what takes place online does affect reality as, in CMC, "we write in the present...[w]e are acting upon words that make our body move to respond and which in turn cause others to do the same" (Argyle & Shields, 1996: 67). Thus gender bifurcation and other identity stereotypes are simply transplanted onto so-called virtual environments.

However—and this is not surprising, considering the findings of language theorists such as Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick—though chat participants may communicate with each other on the basis of binary classifications of gender,

neither the function of utterances nor the construction of gender adheres to dualistic descriptions, as past research has implied...[instead] [t]he dualistic gender system poses several problems...[as] this hegemonic system does not accurately describe the array of multiple un/gendered traits that individuals exhibit...[for] [c]omputer-mediated interlocutors may perform masculinity, femininity, gender neutrality, some combination, or none of these. (Rodino, n.d.)

This can be said to be true, not only in CMC, but also in face-to-face communication.

Lastly, as a mere observation, CMC does not only allow for the two genders to extend their identity possibilities, but, as a form of writing and speech in one, it allows people to extend their communication possibilities. An example is when, in another chat session, Zed asks Jaguar what he previously said which she had missed and he answers, "ZED go up to see my statement." This one could not do in real life unless they were to record all the conversations they had.

My research, therefore, supports that the most recent theories on representations of gender through language are true and can be proved so, not only off line, but also on line. This paper demonstrates the degree to which gender is *truly*

represented by language on the internet and specifically in CMC. But my study is by no means conclusive evidence of the possibility of a new model, yet it raises questions that I hope will lend themselves to some positive input in this field of research.

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