



A Sociolinguistic Study of Male-Female Children Conversations in “The Simpsons” Cartoon

Noor Othman Al-Jeburi

College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, Babylon, Iraq

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Corresponding Author:

Noor Othman Al-Jeburi

College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, Babylon, Iraq

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Abstract: Among the theories and studies of gender, there are many that assert the idea of language and interaction differences on the bases of the gender of the speaker. Being male or female decides the style of person's speech and the form of his language tendencies that accord with his gender. This keeps true mostly to adult and old people speech. The aim of this study is to investigate whether this feature extends to include children speech, especially, in cartoons. Cartoons are almost the only favourite media that children are connected to, of course if social media networks are excluded. Since, any single attitude presented in cartoons will be easily adopted by children as they try to imitate whatever they are exposed to, it is needed to shed light on the way different gender speeches are portrayed.

INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is defined differently by different scholars but the working one that covers them all is that it makes a link between society and language. Gender, being one of the social factors that has a role in language variation is defined as “the cultural traits and behaviors deemed appropriate for men or women by a particular society”. Many theorists have been concerned with describing the variation that could be figured out in the language of men and women. However, there are three major theories on this respect that will occupy the realm of this study language, namely, deficit, dominance and difference. On the basis of these three theories, the data extracted from the Simpsons cartoon are going to be analysed.

This topic, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, has not been given its due attention that is why the present study attempts to answer the following questions: does male and female children language differs following their

gender difference?. Which of the above three theories of gender proves to be creditable in describing mixed-gender speech?

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, the study puts the following aims at its disposal: Investigating male and female children language in conversations. Testifying the credibility of the above three theories of gender.

For the sake of achieving the aims of the study, it is hypothesized that: Male children’s language differs from female’s in conversations. Both difference and deficit theories are creditable in describing mixed-gender speech.

To test the hypotheses and achieve the aims, the following procedures are to be followed: Presenting a brief theoretical account of the three theories of gender and theories of conversation analysis. Analysing the data taken from the Simpsons cartoon.

The study is limited to some extracts of The Simpsons cartoon reserved from the speeches of Bart Simpson and his sister Lisa.

Gender in sociolinguistics: Numerous definitions of Sociolinguistics have been proposed by a number of linguists and sociolinguists each of these definitions acknowledge that Sociolinguistics has to do with language use. For instance, Hudson^[1] defines it as the study of the relationship between language and social factors such as age, class, gender and ethnicity. Spolsky^[2], on the other hand, states that sociolinguistics is the study of language variation, of attitudes about language and of the link between language and society.

Based on the preceding definitions, it is clear that sociolinguistics shows how groups in a given society are separated by certain social variables like religion, ethnicity, age, status, gender and level of education. Gender, one of the social variables and the major concern of this study is used by Yule^[3] and distinguished for three uses; biological, grammatical and social. The first is also known as “natural” gender which refers to the distinction in sex between the “male” and “female” of each species. Grammatical gender indicates the distinction between “masculine” and “feminine.”. The third use is social which is the distinction one makes when he uses words like “man” and “woman” to classify individuals in terms of their social roles.

Gender is something people do in their interactions and something that is performed rather than an expression of what people are. In other words, it is not a fact but an act. Therefore, it is never truly finished and these gender performances are viewed during analysis as changeable and dependent on context^[4].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Theories on gender: Three of the major theories on gender are going to be presented in this section, namely, Jespersen’s deficit, Zimmerman and West’s dominance, and Tannen’s difference.

Otto Jespersen’s deficit theory: The former approach to gender as a social variable can be found as early as 1922, in the work of Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen who puts some claims about certain gender differences:

- Women talk a lot
- Women use half-finished sentences because they speak before they have thought about what they will say
- Women are emotional rather than grammatical
- Women use adjectives such as “pretty” and “nice” too much. They are also fond of saying “so pretty” and “so nice”
- Women use adverbs too much specifically adverbs of intensity (e.g., ‘awfully pretty’, ‘terribly nice’) and tend towards hyperbole

- Women know their smaller vocabulary, so, well that they are more fluent in speaking and less hesitant than men who are searching for the precise word in their large vocabularies
- Women had a “preference for veiled and indirect expressions“ which preclude them from being as effective as men
- Women had a debilitating effect upon the language and it was reasonable for men “certainly with great justice (to) object that there is a danger of the language becoming languid and insipid if we are to content ourselves with women’s expressions”
- Men, being linguistic innovators, are responsible for introducing new words into the language (e.g., coining new words)

Jespersen’s claims have been criticized by other scholars as he has not conducted any studies rather he bases his work largely on fiction -literature and quoting others who didn’t do any studies. Furthermore, he relies on ‘folk linguistics’ and stereotypes rather than systematic research. Finally, in his work, male language is normative (standard) and the language of others (the child, the foreigner and the woman) is considered extra to that norm and as such deficient. From that occurs the name of his theory, deficit.

Dominance paradigm: Zimmerman and West^[5] have directed a study towards dominance in conversations in which they report that in 11 conversations between men and women, men used 46 interruptions but women only two. This indicates how often men break down usual and normal moves or rules of turn-taking when conversing.

Conversational interruptions that occur among mixed-sex pairs are, according to them, often interpreted as an assault on the established power relations. Such interruption can embody two factors; disrespect and assertiveness than mere individual infractions. For example, when a woman interrupts a man, the pair will be rated significantly more disrespectful and assertive than either of the two same-sex pairs.

Within ongoing relationships, Kollock *et al.*^[6] states, findings show that the more dominant member, the one with higher decision-making influence interrupts more than the less influential member. For example, parents interrupt their children more than the reverse in parent-child encounters, “teachers” interrupt their “students” more than the reverse and physicians tend to interrupt their patients more than the reverse. However, an exception to this last pattern takes place when the interaction involves a female doctor and a male patient, in which case the patient interrupts the physician.

In sum, conversational interruptions may not only reflect unequal power rather the higher power person is freer to interrupt a person possessing lower power. Thus, being a male would be fair enough for a patient to interrupt a female doctor^[7].

Tannen's difference paradigm: The difference theory was summarized in Tannen's⁽⁸⁾ book *You just don't understand* in an article in which she represents male and female language use in a series of six contrasts: status vs. support.

This claims that men seek to achieve the upper hand or to prevent others from dominating them. Women, however, talk to gain confirmation and support for their ideas. If put differently, men see the world as a place where people try to gain status and keep it. Women see the world as "a network of connections seeking support and consensus".

Independence vs. intimacy: Women often think in terms of closeness and support and struggle to preserve intimacy. Men, concerned with status, tend to focus more on independence. These traits can lead women and men to plainly different views of the same situation.

Advice vs. understanding: To many men a complaint is a challenge to find a solution: "When my mother tells my father she doesn't feel well, he invariably offers to take her to the doctor. Invariably, she is disappointed with his reaction. Like many men, he is focused on what he can do whereas she wants sympathy⁽⁹⁾."

Information vs. feelings: Culturally and historically speaking, men's concerns were seen as more important than those of women but today this situation may be reversed so that the giving of information and brevity of speech are considered of less value than sharing of emotions and elaboration.

Orders vs. proposals: It is claimed that women often suggest that people do things in indirect ways "let's", "why don't we?" or "wouldn't it be good, if we...?" Men may use and prefer to hear, a direct imperative.

Conflict vs. compromise: This situation can be clearly observed in work-situations where a management decision seems unattractive-men will often resist it vocally while women may appear to accede (i.e., agree), but complain subsequently.

Cartoons discourse: Cartoons are a means for an end which is communicating on heterogeneous serious issues that make the news. Cartoons highlight the ridiculous in the society and project the ideal. By means of communicating words, phrases or sentences cartoons communicate meaning and intention. This intention might not be of the cartoonist only but of the whole society.

Cartoons serve as an analysable discourse as they are goal-directed and through which news, opinions, events,

and ideas are communicated. These ideas most of the time are determined by the society in which they sprout. Thus, cartoons can be said to be controlled by society and controlling it simultaneously. Socio-linguistically, cartoons can offer a rich base for analysis since it constitutes one of the social context at which language can be examined.

Among the roles of cartoons is to spread important social information. The mass media as stated by Sani *et al.*⁽¹⁰⁾ applies in life as an agent of socialization and has a chief role in shaping and determining public opinion. By virtue of reaching many, they establish themselves as a strong initiator of discourse.

Cartoons, in Rockson's⁽¹¹⁾ words are 'constructive' in the sense that they provide specific conception of the social world and the discourse that they engender.

Gender, politeness and power: Lakoff⁽¹²⁾ states that women tend to use more polite devices than men to soften the act. Women's speech is linked to the use of hedges, for instance, the use of I think, I prefer, etc. On the other hand men tend to use taboo words and slang language. Similarly, Holmes⁽¹³⁾ argues that women are more polite than men due to the fact that women seek communication through language while men seek power.

Power is mainly of two kinds; transformative and relational. As transformative, power refers to the capacity of agents to affect the course of events. Power in this sense may be enabling and positive as well as repressive, and it is a capacity possessed in some degree by any actor, dominant or dominated. Power in the second sense is a relational concept, 'power over,' and is linked to domination by individuals or collectivities. The latter type is known as domination as it represents the negative exercise of power⁽¹⁴⁾.

There is a commonality between power and gender in that both are things which are done by people rather than features of them. In this vein, Eelen⁽¹⁵⁾ points out, power is 'something people do to each other'.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collection and analysis:

Data collection: The data to be analysed is taken from The Simpsons cartoon which is a series that centers on a typical American family and their life that serve as a satire of a middle class American lifestyle. Some extracts are reserved from the conversations of Bart Simpson (10 years old) and his sister Lisa (8 years old).

Data analysis: In this study five extracts of conversations between Bart and Lisa will be analysed to figure out the characteristics of their speech as a result to their gender differences.

Extract 1:

- Lisa: Wow. It's almost like scene into the future
- Bart: Hey what is this beauty? You're trying to grow a friend? Hey, you built a modeled city? Is that a school? Oops, my finger slipped. Oops, my finger slipped. Oops, my finger slipped
- Lisa: Baaart! Stop it. Oh. My poor little guys. That Bart is so rude

The above extract shows the rudeness of Bart who tries to mistreat his sister Lisa as he destroys her school project. On the other hand, it can be figured Lisa's use of intensifiers, adjectives and adverbs along this short conversation. Such a use indicates her indirect speech as she says "It's almost like scene..." by resorting to mitigating adverbs. Her feeling of sadness as a consequence of Bart's damage of her project is clear throughout her reaction 'oh'. This can lead to her sensitive personality.

Extract 2:

- (a noise is heard on the roof)
- Lisa: (gasp) What was that?
- Bart: Could it be?
- (the kids rush to the window)
- Bart: It's craptacular. (on Homer's Christmas lights display)

This extract gives an incidence in which Bart invents a new word, that is 'craptacular' to describe the way in which his father, Homer has displayed the lights of Christmas. This might reflect the boys responsibility to introduce new words throughout the process of coinage or invention and other ways to be linguistic innovators just like men.

Extract 3:

- Lisa: Finally, I knew we could solve that maze using algorithm
- Bart: Told you
- Lisa: No, You didn't. Your plan was to burn the corn
- Bart: That was never my plan. (corn burns behind Bart who tries to hide it)

What this extract reveals is the difference of thinking between boys and girls. Boys resort to whatever easy way at their disposal out of problems they get in regardless of costs and bad consequences. Another thing to consider here is that boys lie in order to veil their wicked behaviour and demonstrate that they are good at planning. On the other hand, girls recourse to science and reason to get out of the difficulties. That is why, Lisa has made use of algorithm to solve the labyrinth.

Extract 4:

- Bart: So, Lis ready for your trip?
- Lisa: Here, I am
- Bart: (Throws her down) See you next fall. Hhh hhha
- Lisa: You make those same stupid jokes every field trip
- Bart: Neh. You've worked in the business as long as I have. You bound to repeat yourself. (throws her down again)

Bart's continuous abuses to Lisa is found as well in this extract where he mocks her by throwing her down and laughing at her. Bart keeps being engaged in activities associated with aggression and masculinity with her. This behavior is treated by Lisa's mere complain. She has not tried to do the same with her brother. Nevertheless, she has not even mocked him or used some unpleasant words to bide him. This might indicate the restriction of wicked actions to boys and hard acceptance of girls. Lisa's answer 'Here, I am' designates her innocence in comparison to Bart's evil attitude.

Actually, in another conversation, Bart and Lisa were exchanging insults, however, Bart complained to his mother when she told them to stop saying that hers was better. He does not want her to defeat him in that matter even. This proves the idea that boys try to be the dominant all of the time.

Extract 5:

- Lisa: Bart, you are the meanest nastiest little boy who ever lived
- Bart: Hey, there is a dog in the next car looking at me
- Lisa: You don't even care how upset I am. This time, you have gone toooo far

Another instance of Lisa's extensive use of adjectives is in the above sample where she uses 'meanest nastiest little' three adjectives together to show her anger towards her brother who pushed her and threw her in the pool. It is actually another evidence for her words reaction rather than action reaction towards a mocking and embarrassing situation that Bart put her into in front of her teacher and colleagues. The intensifier 'too' is further used. Despite Lisa's vast anger, Bart response shows his carelessness and inattention. This also could be regarded as an insult to his sister since changing the topic might indicate that and reveal his power over his sister in this conversation.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study can lead to the following conclusions: boys prove to be impolite in their speech to girls due to their miss-exercise of power. This impoliteness exceeds speech and encompasses action as well which is figured in more than one extract. Sarcasm

and mocking are among the techniques used by Bart towards his sister which can serve as face-threatening acts.

Girls just like women in Jespersen's theory make extensive use of adverbs and adjectives in their speech, specifically adverbs of intensity as well as intensifiers, such as 'so' and 'too'. Such uses are not found a lot in boys or men's speech.

Boys show responsibility towards the invention of new words similar to adult males. This could be considered also as a deficient in boy's language since they do not stick to the original expressions of the language they are speaking.

Boys take longer turns at speaking, since, Bart's words all over the extracts are (88) while Lisa's are (83) despite the fact that the difference is not that much yet it proves the opposite of what Jespersen claims "women talk a lot".

Boys struggle for achieving the upper hand even in insults similar to what Tannen has stated. Despite the criticisms associated with Jespersen theory, the findings of this study prove its credibility as theory on gender for the description of male and female children language in mixed-gender conversations. Yet, some of its claims are not proved or actually proved to be the opposite, specifically, the previous point (4) of length of women's or females speech.

Finally, Tannen's theory is attested to be creditable as well due to the previous findings that accord with Tannen's points of contrast between men and women, specially girl's emotions and feelings in comparison to boy's status and dominance as well as the formers compromise rather than conflict. This latter point is found clearly in Lisa's reactions in both extracts, 4 and 5.

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