Factors influencing the contrast between men's and women's speech
Malcah Yaeger-Dror

It has been demonstrated by sociolinguists that women and men do not speak alike. In fact, even in the analysis of dialect variation, where the focus is on women (or men) as innovators, different linguists have radically different opinions, buttressed, it would appear, by incontrovertible evidence. The present paper will suggest that the naivety of linguists has influenced the research designs which permit the collection of data on which these analyses of language variation were made; it will propose methods for collecting data which will reveal more clearly the language-gender connection, without confusion induced by the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972), the tendency for the interviewees' speech habits and reports of speech habits to be influenced by the mere fact that they are being observed by an outsider.

The paper will suggest that controlling for sex composition of interviewer-interviewee dyads in studies of linguistic change is relevant to all levels of communicative behavior. Until we design our studies to compare linguistic practices by the sex composition of the interacting dyad—especially among age similar pairs—it is premature to speculate about sex differences in language change. The paper provides examples of studies that have confounded the cross-gender influence on language choice with the influence of interviewee sex alone, and discusses the implications for language change studies, and for our understanding of convergence and divergence. The paper suggests three methods which can be used to control for this problem: The researcher can use homogeneous pairs, can use naturalistic observation, or systematic comparisons by dyadic sex differences. Hopefully this discussion will not only sensitize researchers to the potential shortcomings of the research designs in common use [and the dangers of drawing conclusions from studies based on such research], but will provide more adequate possible designs.

Review of the literature

Principle I: Women as rearguard guerrillas

Many British linguists portray women as providing a conservative/retrograde influence in changes which are assumed to be conscious, or 'from above [the level of awareness]' (Trudgill 1972,1983; Wardhaugh 1991:§8). In fact, women are reported to be fighting this rearguard action, using standard forms, even when linguistic changes are completed. Labov (1990) refers to this as Principle I of the sexual differentiation of sound change.

For example,

- The linguistic variable -ing—or (ing), with parentheses denoting it as a sociolinguistic variable—is known to be fairly stable in English, since the variation between -ing and -in' has been attested for centuries, without the change having become categorical. The 'blame' for retention of -ing is placed on women and the Upper Middle Class (Trudgill 1972, Chambers 1995).

- Wolfram's (1969) interviews with Afro-Americans in Detroit also revealed that women favored Standard forms more than men: men used more negative concord [can't get no satisfaction], [f] for (q) as in [wlf] for with, and copula deletion [He...ready.] than women.

- Trudgill (1972) and Chambers and Trudgill (1980) found that in both England and Norway women report themselves as speaking even more Standard than they actually do, while men report themselves as using more vernacular pronunciation.

Different explanations have been given for this contrasting behavior of men and women. Trudgill (1983:§9) theorized that men have economic sources of prestige, while women tap into the prestige of a higher economic group. Using language as a status display. Alternatively, he suggests that women adapt themselves to more standard usage for interacting with children. Either of these hypotheses addresses the apparent fact that women limit vernacular change by using older—'Standard'—forms.

However, other hypotheses have been proposed which permit other conclusions:

- Like Trudgill, Cheshire (1982) found that Reading lower working class preteens and teenaged girls also use much more Standard syntax than the boys. She drew the conclusion that women's use of Standard syntax is not a 'rearguard action', but is a response to economic needs: Boys expect to gain their livelihood in blue collar occupations (truck drivers, masons), while girls look forward to white collar occupations (hairdressers, secretaries). Cheshire concludes that the linguistic marketplace supports the sex differences observed.

- Nichols (1983, 1984) found that South Carolina Creole features are much stronger in the speech of men than of women. Like Cheshire, Nichols showed that the men in her study had blue collar jobs which neither required, nor permitted them to interact with Standard speakers, while women worked in service jobs which required them to
interact with and accommodate to Standard speakers.

- Milroy (1980) found that Belfast vernacular-speaking women used the more Standard form more consistently in three of four variables studied; moreover, since younger men use the vernacular forms more consistently than their elders, while younger women use them less consistently, her data support the claim that women’s and men’s speech is diverging. The preference of these women for nonvernacular phonology has also been traced to their jobs and social networks.

Cheshire, Nichols and Milroy all found women’s speech to be less vernacular than men’s, but they determined that the difference between men’s and women’s speech can be traced to specific interactional needs which supercede those of speaker-sex.

A recent twist on this claim, presented in Gordon (1997), is that women adopt prestige forms as much as a distancing device as to accommodate toward a role, or job model. Gordon presents evidence that in addition, women are influenced by the fact that (at least in Australian society), women using working class speech are perceived as sexually promiscuous, and thus, (for women) stigmatized; women avoid working class speech to distance themselves from being perceived as such, while men need not avoid giving such an impression.

Accommodation as a critical variable

All of the researchers just cited share--to differing degrees--an understanding based on the work of Howard Giles (Giles & Coupland 1991), now referred to as Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). This theory claims that speakers accommodate their speech to that of those they interact with most frequently. In most cases they unconsciously try to converge--to talk more like those they interact with. Milroy’s careful network based research in Belfast provides detailed evidence for this theory.

A corollary theory, proposed by Sankoff & Laberge (1978), finds that speakers will unconsciously shape their speech to converge toward the speech of those who provide the best interactive and financial fit with their ‘marketplace’ needs. Both Nichols’ and Milroy’s results support this theory. Cheshire’s results also demonstrate that even before they are required to earn their living, or to interact with others in a specific linguistic marketplace milieu, speakers are already accommodating to that projected milieu. Consequently, it appears that the measurable preference of men for the vernacular, and of women for the Standard, may be attributable to more general sociolinguistic pressures. The more social networks of men and women overlap, the less pronounced the gender/dialect split will be; conversely, the less the social networks overlap, the more extreme the differences will be.5

Principle II: women on the vanguard of change from below.

Labov (1990, 1994;§4), Eckert (1989), Milroy (1991) and Chambers (1995;§3) all demonstrate that women’s speech leads in most ‘changes from below’ as well. Labov (1990) cites as Principle II for language change that women are usually at least a generation ahead of men in changes from below.

- In Charmey (Switzerland) Gauchat (1905) already saw that women were a generation ahead of the men. When Hermann (1929) returned to Charmey, those changes were completed [even for the men], but women were initiating newer linguistic changes.

- In the USA, most phonological changes in the vernacular which have been studied show women are at least a generation ahead of men (Labov, Yaeger & Steiner 1973, Labov 1990, Eckert 1989, 1991; Feagin 1990). In the majority of cases, women are a generation ahead at early stages, and the gender distinction is neutralized as a change is completed, although a few studies have shown that specific vernacular advances--like (ay) raising in Philadelphia (Labov 1994)--may have been initiated by men.

- In Canada as well, both English (Chambers 1995, Clarke 1993) and French (Thibault & Davély 1989, Yaeger-Dror & Kemp 1992, Yaeger-Dror 1994) corpora reveal women to be more than a generation ahead of men in most phonological changes from below.

- The same is true in Latin America (Cedergren 1973, 1984; Labov 1990).

- In the Arabic-speaking world, Abd el Jawad (1987), Bakir (1986), Haeri (1987), Holes (1985), and Royale (1985) take the position that in such di- (or even tri-) glossec cultures men may wildly hypercorrect toward prestigious phonology [say, pronouncing Qur’an with a pharyngeal (q)], while dialectal changes from below permit women to increase their use of other newer forms, which vary in different countries. Those who try to make this material conform to the image of women as linguistically conservative claim that the Arab women’s non-maintenance of the older form reflects their lack of access to the ‘public’ world, but the recent research showing women to
be in the vanguard of the vernacular’s advance no longer permits that interpretation, since in each urban center—Amman, Baghdad, Basra or Bahrain, Cairo or Nablus—the women are introducing a new phonological variant, which the younger men are adopting. If women are in the forefront of a general urban sociolinguistic change, it cannot be because they lack access to the larger urban social world.

What hypotheses have been suggested to explain the fact that women lead in linguistic changes from below? Why is it that most vernacular changes appear to be initiated by women? One hypothesis proposes that since women are the caregivers, the asymmetry of caregiving will advance women’s linguistic innovations while retarding men’s innovations (Labov 1990), and more female-initiated changes are likely to enter the next generation’s vernacular. Chambers favors a Neuropsychological Theory (1995:132f), based on cognitive literature which shows women to be more linguistically competent across the board, not just sociolinguistically.

The two principles and CAT

Considering the fact that women appear to support both conscious / corrective changes and unconscious vernacular changes, the causes of these divergent linguistic patterns should be reconsidered. One would expect that cultures that permit greater social intimacy between men and women would be sociolinguistically similar to each other [with men’s and women’s speech less divergent], but different from cultures which do not permit cross-gender interactions [with, presumably, a greater discrepancy between men’s and women’s speech]. However, that common sense approach is not supported by an overview of the data on gender and language change: note that the Western European data (aside from Belfast) appear to support Principle I at the expense of Principle II, while the New World data (aside from Labov’s earliest work in NY) primarily support Principle II. Consequently, ‘Western’ cultures [the US, Britain, and the North of Europe], which permit greater cross gender interaction, appear to work on radically different cultural principles, since some studies reveal Principle I tendencies, while others appear to favor Principle II. In contrast, the United States, Latin American cultures, and Arab cultures, all seem to favor Principle II, despite the fact that the latter are understood to permit much more restricted interaction between men and women. Why is it that the USA linguistic data reveal such different patterns from the recent Western European studies, although there are strong cultural similarities between them, while Arabic-speakers—who appear both culturally and linguistically distinct from both the US and Western Europe, reveal the same gender-language patterning? This apparent anomaly alone should convince us that not only these two principles, but the research on which they were based, should be carefully scrutinized.

Why is speech correction (of men toward the vernacular, and of women toward the standard) so much more rampant in the British data—and in the data of those trained in England? Why are women’s vernaculars so much more advanced in US data—and in the data of those trained in a Labovian paradigm? I hypothesize that one cultural difference which influences these data is the culture of interviewing. In fact, the hypothesis has already been proposed that there must be some artefact of interview ‘register’ (Biber 1994) which influences the speech habits of the speakers (Wolfson 1976). Labov (1972) loosely characterized the conglomeration of such artefacts the ‘Observer’s Paradox’: The mere fact that an observer is present [whether an outsider-interviewer or even as a tape-recorder], alters the speech situation and therefore the speech used. Labov’s initial claim was that the interviewer’s interest in speech causes speakers to accommodate to the interviewer’s perceived ‘needs’ and expectations (Yaeger 1974). However, the importance of the interviewer’s sex relative to the interviewee’s has not generally been understood to be a part of that ‘paradox’.

Two additional variables: power and solidarity

When we consider speech from different cultures, we find that cultural attitudes toward permissible speech between men and women further complicates any ‘rules’ which might be posited for cross-sexual interviews. Recent papers by Walters (1994, 1996) hint that even in less stylized interactional situations than the sociolinguistic interview, cultural expectations of the permissible range of male-female interactional options influences the speech used by men and women in different societies. Gordon’s study (1997), discussed earlier, presents one specialized ‘take’ on this claim, as does Holmes (1995) and some of the papers in Bergvall, Bing and Freed (1997). These perspectives have not generally been adequately considered in our analysis of speech data.

Brown & Gilman (1960) discussed two variables which influence male-female interactions, but which we generally do not consider. They pointed out that the vectors of power and solidarity strongly influence speakers’ choice of pronouns, and that different cultures [or even the same culture at different points in time] manipulate these vectors in quite different ways. Speech used in cross-sex interactions obviously is conditioned by the power relations and social solidarity permissible between men and women within a specific culture.

- Power: In cultures where there is an obvious generalized power discrepancy between men and women, the possibilities for social solidarity [cum networking and convergence] are severely limited, so sociolinguists consider the sex-
matching of dyads to be critical for ‘natural’ interviews.

- **Solidarity**: In contrast, we assume that in societies like our own which we choose to visualize as being motivated more by the Brown and Gilman solidarity vector, researchers assume we can discount the importance of sex as a social variable. In fact, both these vectors influence the speech analyzed from interviews in ‘Western’ societies, but their influence is rarely taken into consideration. Even where solidarity (and networking) within social groups is the primary influence traced, friendship networks, like those analyzed by Milroy (1980), are primarily made up of same-sex social groups. Milroy (1980), Nichols (1983, 1984), and Cheshire (1982), all showed the degree to which social networks are partly determined by work-related association/solidarity and the linguistic marketplace.

The importance of the sexual symmetry (or asymmetry) of the speech dyad, and our disregard for that asymmetry, influences our interpretation of data. Take, for example, those cases [in apparently solidarity-vector ed societies] where women not only use more standard language, but overreport their standard usage, while men underreport standard usage. The underlying assumption which makes this contrast telling is that [given a specific interviewer] in ‘Western Cultures’ the interview situation is the same for both male and female interviewees. Or is it? In fact, reconsideration of earlier studies shows that the sex of the interviewer is a critical variable which influences speech.

- **A solidarity-relevant setting**: Given the assumption that the dyad sex-mix influences accommodation, let us look closely at the Norwich data which raised many of the questions still being discussed here: In the Norwich study, teenagers were interviewed in schools by a man who was clearly a graduate student. Thus, all the girls were talking in school to an academic man somewhat their senior, somewhat shy and constrained, a perfect gentleman. It is not surprising that not only their speech converged toward what they regarded as college-educated British English, but in addition, they were optimistic enough to report their speech as doing so more consistently than it actually did. On the other hand, while the same (male) interviewer spoke with the boys, in these interviews he was more likely to reveal his strong feeling for the home soccer team, and not surprisingly, both interviewer and interviewee were more likely to accommodate toward a ‘covert prestige’ Norwich vernacular, and the interviewees were more likely to report themselves as being even more influenced by the vernacular than they were. In this way Trudgill discovered which variables were most stable and which were least in the understanding of these two groups of interviewees, and he found that there is a large difference between male-male sports ‘chemistry’ and male-female ‘chemistry’. The real world comparison between specific same-sex and cross-sex interactions reveals that even assuming the cultural reliance on a solidarity vector, convergence differs in same-sex and cross-sex dyads; differences between Trudgill’s male and female interviewees’ speech is at least partly dictated by the fact that the interviewer (Trudgill) was of necessity the same sex as the men, and formed same-sex dyads with only one group of speakers. Would the girls have overreported their standard usage as systematically to a less ‘desirable’ interviewer? Would the guys have been as likely to underreport had the interviewer been a woman of the appropriate age? or (even) if Trudgill had asked them more questions about (say) Shakespeare, than about the home team’s chances?

- **To take another example**: the Montreal corpus was carefully planned so that all the interviews would be as similar as possible. However, it was impossible to set up the system so that all interviewees would have (say) same sex interviewers, and it was assumed that training of the interviewers obviated the necessity of matching at that level. All the interviewers in the original corpus were (like Trudgill in his first Norwich study) twenty-something home town grad students. In the Montreal study, it is not immediately obvious that the interviewer’s sex influences the interview situation, but when you listen to interviews with teenagers and young adults, it appears that female interviewers of young men did not get maximally vernacular speech, while they did get maximally vernacular speech in interviews with girls. When talking to a peer or near peer who discussed age appropriate topics, subjects’ convergence differed with same-sex and cross-sex interviewers. Specific topics chosen provide intuitive insight: a discussion of (say) dating habits is different when asked by a same-sex interviewer and by someone of the opposite sex! In both studies, close attention to individual interviews reveals that the relevance of the sex-dyad variable is strengthened by increasing potential similarity / solidarity, along other measurable parameters like age and social class. The more similar the pair are in age and
social group, the more salient the sex-dyad variable.

Not only working class twenty-something men often accommodated as radically as they could to the good-looking [middle class] interviewers, but even some middle-aged, middle class men were flirtatious.

Undoubtedly, peer same-sex talk is 'natural', and so is convergence toward a possible (however improbable) date, but interviews of people in their teens and twenties, by people in their twenties are not as comparable as could be wished because sex-dyad differences are not as simple an issue in Western solidarity-vectored societies as initially assumed. Perhaps women would not appear to be an entire generation ahead in Principle II data, nor so hypercorrect in Principle I data if interviewers' genders were always matched with the interviewees', or if at least interviewers' ages were MISmatched with the interviewees'. When an older Trudgill did new Norwich interviews in the eighties, the discrepancy between teen men's and women's results was reduced: Is that a question of dialect/culture change in progress, or one of non-comparability of the accommodative priorities of near-same-age dyads with non-age-(near)matched dyads?

There does not appear to be a simple way of measuring gender/language differences accurately without taking these sex-dyad biases into account. This is not to imply that all of the differences which have been attributed to men (unmarked or conservative) and women (hypercorrect or innovative) should now be traced to an artefact of interview design. However, the interviewer-sex bias should be corrected for whenever possible.

Possible solutions

What can a field worker do to maximize the chance that gender-matching (as an accommodative/ audience design issue) can be dealt with effectively? Three methods of dealing with this field work problem come to mind:

- One is the Montreal method: do the best you can to collect interviews which are as similar as possible, and try to remain cognizant of the remaining influences which shape the data. In studies where there are many interviewers, the bias could be further reduced by using either same sex interviewers, or interviewers whose ages differ from the interviewees.

- Another is the method used in recent work by Allan Bell (in press). He chose all the variables which appear to influence New Zealand interaction, and created a grid, filling as many of the cells as possible with his interviews, in his case--Male-Female and Maori-Pakeha [Caucasian]. For example, using an age-matched corpus, a Pakeha man spoke with another Pakeha man, with a Maori man, and with Maori and Pakeha women. Of course, individual differences still influenced the speech patterns which occurred in the study. But Bell's study represents the first time that the possible combinations of sex dyads was understood to be a critical element in language variation, and the research design was manipulated to analyze that influence.

- A third is the method used by the Milroys (1980), or Eckert (1989), who cultivated three dimensional relations with those whose speech was analyzed rather than using interviews. Granted, this is the most time consuming method, but, where possible, it certainly helps provide the most adequate social and sociological perspective on individual variation.

- Cheshire used a variation on this method by collecting speech of the community members with each other in groups, and minimizing the interviewer's 'presence' in the interaction.

Note that all these researchers have concluded that there are speech differences which are clearly independent of those which might be imposed by interviewer sex-dyad bias: Cheshire and Milroy uncovered Principle I differences, while Milroy and Eckert found Principle II differences. I do not project that eliminating the sex influence on the solidarity vector described above will totally eliminate evidence of systematic differences between men's and women's speech, but that avoiding these influences will help us to more accurately pinpoint the differences, measure their magnitude, and determine the sources of variation.

Conclusion

The discussion of whether men's and women's speech differs in systematic ways, and whether men's speech and women's speech are shifting in the same direction [with differences being ultimately neutralized as a change is completed] are important issues, since they would provide critical evidence for the actual mechanisms of sound change, as well as evidence of whether men and women are members of the same speech community, or whether they are [as a popular book title claims] from different planets. However, neither the analysis of the gender breakdown of language change, nor the comparison of the changes taking place in men's and women's speech can be accurately traced when the Observer's Paradox, in the form of interference from unacknowledged (but potent) factors, is biasing the data gathered. Whether language change or politeness strategies are at issue, we must not lose sight of the fact that all speakers have multiple social identities, with gender being interpretable not just relative to the power vector, but relative to other interpersonal
parameters (Bergvall, et al. 1997, Eckert & McConnel-Ginet 1992, Gordon 1997, Hall & Bucholtz 1995, Holmes 1995). Whatever these multifaceted underlying reasons for the differences between men’s and women’s speech, they can only be adequately analyzed when we formulate our research design to ‘track’ these various influences, and minimize contamination by unacknowledged sex-related influences, so that we can evaluate the sex-related speech differences which can be traced to specific causes.

Notes

1 ‘Changes from below [the level of awareness]’ are unconscious changes taking place in the vernacular, and are generally found to be applied by speakers systematically, and are assumed to follow quasi-universal linguistic tendencies, while those from above [the level of awareness] are conscious changes, which occur more sporadically, and do not follow more general theoretical patterns (Labov 1972).

2 See further discussions below.

3 Note, however, that given an understanding of accommodative tendencies, disparity/ies between men’s and women’s speech in a given sociolinguistic community generally provides evidence that even and women neither share the same social networks nor the same work opportunities. Whatever the linguistic facts tell us about language change, they provide food for thought about the social and economic sex-based differences in Western society/ies.

4 Which they showed to be diagnostic of social discrepancies that presumably influence a wide range of speech variable usage.

5 Note that such diverse studies as Hindle (1979), Coupland (1980) and Rickford & McNair Knox (in press) and Bell (in press) have also shown the importance of topic, even when the variable of sex is less isolated.

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Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Word?
By Susan N. Wilson
Executive Coordinator, Network for Family Life Education

There seems to be a strange campaign afoot to remove the S-word from our lexicon. Its perpetrators seem to believe that if no one mentions “it,” adolescents won’t know or think about it and therefore, won’t engage in it.

Consider this: Robie Harris is about to go on an Oklahoma radio station to promote her book, It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex and Sexual Health, and to encourage parents to talk with their 10- to 14-year old children about sexual topics. The show’s host asks her please not to mention the S-word on the air. Although Harris thinks the request “outrageous,” she complies and tells listeners that “this book is about the birds and the bees.” Once off the air, she charges that avoidance of the S-word is “just one more example of how what is natural and normal gets distorted by our culture.”

Further evidence: a Texas educator calls our office about SEX, etc., our health and sexuality newsletter, written for teens by teens. She likes the publication, but explains that, in Texas, she couldn’t possibly distribute a newsletter with that title. I explain that the first editorial board of students chose the name to get teens’ attention and we are presently distributing over 100,000 copies of each issue to 85 percent of New Jersey high schools, almost without controversy. She is not persuaded.

In North Carolina, teachers in one major city are forbidden to utter the words “abortion,” “bisexual,” “gay,” “homosexual,” “lesbian,” “masturbation,” “orgasm,” “transsexual,” and “transvestites.” Below grade 8, they are also forbidden to say, “birth control,” “condom” and “contraception.” The theory behind these prohibitions seems to be that the words themselves will encourage students to have sexual intercourse or become homosexual.

New Jersey, too, shows signs of head-in-the-sand mentality. At the recommendation of Department of Education professionals, the State Board of Education recently decided that fourth graders were too young to learn about puberty and reproduction, because teachers might have to explain intercourse. The policymakers felt more comfortable requiring that the topics be covered by the eighth grade, long after most students will have achieved puberty. “By eighth grade,” one astute newspaper columnist snorted, “a lesson on puberty is a history lesson.”

Fear of the S-words can also result in bad education. A New Jersey health educator took exception to a letter published on the opinion page of SEX, etc. in which a high school senior explains her decision to engage in protected sexual intercourse. The student editors believed that the letter could start classroom discussion on the risks and consequences of having sex as a teenager. But the teacher couldn’t see the value of having an open discussion with her students, many of whom, according to reliable national studies, engage in sexual intercourse in high school; she simply saw the letter as a lure to her students to engage in teen sex.

Adults’ fear and restrictions run contrary to what most young people say they want and need. At a recent focus group of students who had graduated from New Jersey high schools, most said that their family life courses were “too little, too late” and gave them a grade of “C.” But one student described a completely different approach. “We started to talk about these topics early, in fourth grade,” she explained. “By high school, my teacher was able to answer all our questions without restrictions. She made a real difference in my life. Without her openness, I would have gotten into lots of trouble.” This student gave her program an “A.”

In my opinion, the campaign to expunge the S-word and avoid conveying vital health information to young people deserves an “F.”

The Network for Family Life Education is at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903
Contact the National Coalition Against Censorship, 275 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001, (212) 807-6222;
website: http://www.ncac.org; e-mail: ncac@netcom.com;