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The Gender Difference Model: Ascendance and Controversy

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1. Introduction

Do women and men communicate differently? If they do, is it because of culture, or does it reflect inborn differences between the sexes? These are difficult questions, not only for the difficulty of planning any research that would hope to find answers to them, but for their implications for the lives of men and women, both professional and personal. Like many other questions with such widespread implications, theories about gender differences in speech have been introduced into the public consciousness, been adopted as common sense to varying degrees, and been replaced by others as part of the evolution of popular culture. Also like other similar questions, some of the most popular theories come packaged in forms that appeal to the political and social currents of the times.

This paper will explore models that purport to explain gender differences in language use. It will then explore the fact that the one of the models, known as the *difference model*, has emerged to gain widespread acceptance across the world, and the possibility that its success is due to its appeals to prevailing political and scientific trends. Finally, points of discord on the topic between writers of science, social science, linguistics, as well as commentators from popular culture will be addressed. First, gender differences in language use which have been reported will be discussed.

2. Known gender differences in language use and their explanations

a. The dominance model

Although men's and women's speech patterns have long been considered different in popular culture, appearing in such well-known sayings as "Women's tongues are like lambs' tails - they are never still" (Holmes 1998; Tannen 1990), the first major treatment of the subject by academic linguists was Lakoff's (2004) *Language and Woman's Place*, first published in 1975. Cited were women's use of particular lexical items, including "empty adjectives" (ibid, p. 50) such as *delightful*, intensifying adverbs such as *so*, and comparatively specific words for colours, such as *mauve*. Various grammatical means of showing deference, including hedging, tag questions,

greater use of standard forms, and questioning intonation in declarative sentences (so-called “uptalk”) are also described. Lakoff’s (2004) book presented largely anecdotal evidence for its claims, although many of them have been substantiated elsewhere (Newman et al. 2008).

Lakoff’s model explaining women’s differing speech patterns became known as the *dominance model* (Bucholtz 2004), in that women’s use of language to show deference and uncertainty illustrates men’s dominance over women and society. Women’s language was described by the author as a “double-bind” (Lakoff 2004, p. 57) in that women are shunned if they do not adopt submissive speech patterns, and excluded from the most prestigious occupations and positions for their apparent indecisiveness and lack of clarity if they do adopt them. Gender-restricted adjectives and specific words for colours were said to “relegate to women things that are not of concern to [men]” (Lakoff 2004, p. 15), and differences in language use in general ascribed to the titular woman’s inferior place in society. Lakoff’s work led to a trend in sociolinguistic research on men’s and women’s speech, of mixed quality and thematic coherence (Holmes 2008). Lakoff’s *dominance model* is more popular today with women than with men, who seem to prefer biologically-based explanations for gender differences (Tannen 1990). This model for gender differences which does not place an emphasis on social inequality will be discussed in the following section.

b. The difference model

Gender differences in speech from a wider discourse perspective were addressed in detail in Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990). Specifically, men were said to talk more in status-sensitive contexts, while women were said to talk more in private settings (ibid, pp. 76-7), and use gossip as a way to show intimacy (ibid, p. 107). Women were shown to use language which invites cooperation to make requests, where men preferred requests to be stated openly (ibid, pp. 152-5). Additionally, men were shown to interrupt women more than women interrupt men (ibid, p. 188), although Tannen does not attribute this just to inequality of status, as in the *dominance model*.

Tannen (1990) introduced to a wider audience the concept of gender-specific cultures, which create in the minds of men and women differing expectations about how communication is supposed to proceed. Most findings fall into the categories of “report-talk” or “rapport-talk” (ibid, p. 76), said to characterise the speaking styles of men and women respectively. Men are said to see conversation as hierarchical and competitive, and women egalitarian and supportive (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Medina 2008; Newman et al. 2008). This model of women’s and men’s differing expectations and strategies for communication has been called the *difference model* (Wardhaugh 2006).

The *dominance model* and the *difference model* are not mutually exclusive, and no claims to exclusivity are found in Lakoff’s (2004) and Tannen’s (1990; 1994; 2001) respective works. Rather, they have many points in common, including a focus on “differences between women and men, groups they implicitly considered to be well-defined and internally homogeneous” (Cameron 2005, p. 486). Indeed, the idea that girls and boys are raised in different linguistic cultures does not preclude one ultimately dominating the other; a similar point could be made about any disempowered linguistic culture. The emphasis on difference without the assertion that one group necessarily oppresses the other is the key point which distinguishes the two models, and supposed neglect of power disparities has been a point of criticism of the *difference model* (DeFrancisco 1992). Many other authors have written on gender differences in language use without necessarily seeking to support either the *dominance* or *difference* models. These will be discussed in the next section.

c. Findings from other sources

Apart from Lakoff’s (2004) and Tannen’s (1990) most famous works, there have been numerous articles and books on the topic of linguistic differences between men and women. Many of the findings from research on speech differences between genders can be said to be compatible with both the *dominance* and *difference models*. A consistent finding from research on the topic is that contrary to common stereotypes, men talk more than women overall (Hyde and Linn 1988;

Tannen 1990; Wardhaugh 2006). Also, women tend to use more standard forms and have larger vocabularies, while men swear more (Hyde and Linn 1988; Holmes 2008; Newman et al. 2008; Wardhaugh 2006). Additionally, women have been found to make greater use of intensifying adverbs (Newman et al. 2008), concordant with Lakoff's (2004) anecdotal finding. According to a large corpus study by Newman et al. (2008), "Female language emphasized psychological processes, social processes, and verbs. Male language emphasized current concerns" (p. 223). In the same study, women were found to use more emotional words, make greater use of first person pronouns, and hedge their statements with comment clauses such as *I guess* more often (ibid). Many of these findings could feasibly be used to support the *dominance model*, *difference model*, or both.

Recent research has shown that gender differences in language use are nuanced and context-specific. Supporting Tannen's (1990) assertion, men have been shown to speak more in status-sensitive contexts, and about as much as women in other contexts (Holmes 1998; Cameron 2009). Men have been shown adopting an uncertain and hedge-filled style, similar to women's speech under the dominance model, in certain contexts in which they may feel powerless (Holmes 2008). Men have also been described as having their own style of gossip, in contrast to the stereotype that only women gossip (Holmes 2008; Wardhaugh 2006). Culture has been shown to be a powerful factor in mediating gender differences as well, with men rather than women in some cultures showing a greater tendency to use standard, high-prestige and indirect forms and women being more assertive (Cameron 2009; Tanaka 2009; Wardhaugh 2006). It is worth noting that cultural differences such as these do not refute the *dominance model*, as different cultures can express dominance in different ways.

Beyond the expression of gender in speech as a context-dependent phenomenon, recent linguistic research has recast gender itself as a matter of self-representation rather than biological category. Gender communities have been rethought of as "communities of practice" (Cameron 2005; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Wardhaugh 2006), as something one *does* rather than

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Research among linguistics and social scientists is ongoing, but the public perception of gender differences in speech has crystallised most around the *difference model*, rather than the *dominance model* or gender as a community of practice. The next section will explore the reasons for the success of the *difference model* in popular culture.

3. Success of the difference model

a. In popular culture

It is the *difference model* that has gone on to greater recognition in popular culture, helped by a trend in self-help books that use the dichotomous genders as a hook, and by a veritable non-stop stream of articles on gender differences intended for mass consumption, in addition to the popularity of Tannen's (1990) groundbreaking work (DeFrancisco 1992; Kennedy 1994). The popularity of the difference model is buttressed by the popular notion that the roots of human psychology evolved in a hunter-gatherer society with strict gender roles, irrespective of the views of actual evolutionary psychologists (Buss and Schmitt 2011). Although Tannen made no such claims in *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), the notion that gender is part of our immutable biological makeup has not harmed the popularity of the ideas that she helped establish.

The concept of different communication strategies for the two genders is central to several successful self-help books for couples, including the wildly popular *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* by Gray (1992) and *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps* by Pease and Pease (2001). Both repeatedly cite different communication strategies for men and

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women as groups as a primary cause of misunderstanding and friction, giving them much in
common with Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1990). What sets these books apart from
much of the linguistic writing on women's and men's speech patterns is their wholehearted
endorsement of gender-normative and often evolutionarily-rooted explanations such as this
passage from Pease and Pease (2001):

When we as humans accept ourselves as an animal whose impulses are honed by
millions of years of evolution, it makes it easier to understand our basic urges and
impulses, and to be more accepting of ourselves and others. (p. 16)

Although in several places these two books address issues which are also addressed in Lakoff's
(2004) and Tannen's (1990) work, such as exaggeration, colour words, and rapport-talk versus
report-talk, the explanations are always based on inherent or biological differences rather than
socio-cultural issues.

Other treatments of gender issues in the public forum usually adopt a categorical distinction
between men and women similar to that of the dominance or difference model, and either leave
the question of social construction of gender uncommented on or explicitly connect it to
evolutionary psychology. Articles appear in news media with great regularity about gender
differences in communication and other abilities (Kaplan no date, McClintock 2012, Sherwood no
date), differences which are sometimes also described as a barrier women must overcome to
succeed in their careers (Sandberg 2013; Tannen 2001).

Although sources such as Pease and Pease (2001) repeatedly cite evolution as the cause
of psychological gender differences, and feminist backlash against prescriptivism in gender roles
often includes invective against evolutionary psychology, it is worth noting that evolutionary
psychology is far from settled on many issues relevant to the discussion, as will be outlined in the
next section.

b. Support from evolutionary psychology

Writing on evolution from scientists tends to start much further back in evolutionary history than other popular treatments of gender differences. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, gender differences originate in the relative sizes of the sex cells. Biologists Dawkins (1976) and Wilson (1978) as well as Wright (1994) state that the starting point of sex differences in all animals is the larger sex cells of females, i.e. the eggs. From the size difference in sex cells comes the fact that males across the animal kingdom are more likely compete with each other over access to scarce female eggs than vice versa. Writers on evolutionary biology comment extensively on the psychology of competitiveness and the importance of status to men, salient issues for the *difference model* in particular; and on males' perceived need to control females, which is concordant with *dominance model*. Largely absent from their writing is the attribution of observed male and female human social behaviour to an apocryphal stone-age human family prototype, as in Pease and Pease (2001).

It is apparent that the concept of a biological basis for differences in the mental makeup of the sexes has entered the popular conscience in recent years. To at least some extent it is justified, as science has found differences between the sexes in the prevalence of certain psychological disorders (Buss and Schmitt 2011; Hyde and Linn 1988; Medina 2008; Pinker 2002). There is also evidence that some areas of the brain may be used by men and women for different purposes. The idea that men and women use the hemispheres of the brain in different proportions when talking is a topic with much controversy and conflicting evidence (Hyde and Linn 1988; Jarrett 2012; Medina 2008, Pease and Pease 2002) but is a common theme in both expert and non-expert writing on language differences between men and women.

Still, the differences that have been found come in statistical form (Medina 2008) with a high degree of overlap, and do not approach the strict dichotomies that exist in Gray (1992) and Pease and Pease (2001), nor even the more dispassionately described categories in Lakoff (2004) or Tannen (1990). Further, although the relationship between these differences and differences in

language use by modern men and women is unclear and unproven, their prevalence in the media almost certainly plays a role in the public perception of gender as ultimately an issue of biology, and adds to the phenomenon that Cameron (2009, p. 173) calls a “Darwinian turn” in the discourse on gender issues.

The union of evolutionary psychology with gender differences in communication has met some resistance in both academia and the public sphere. The next section will deal with some friction that has arisen between people wishing to objectively describe linguistic gender differences, people wishing to minimise them, and people wishing to use them to explain once and for all the difference between men and women.

c. Controversy

There has been a strong backlash from feminists against evolutionary psychology (Buss and Schmitt 2011; Smith and Konik 2011; Vandermassen 2005), although some have criticised this as misinformed (Smith and Konik 2011; Vandermassen 2005). Feminists in popular media have criticised evolutionary psychology’s veracity as a science for some of the claims that have been attributed to it (Marcotte 2012; Marcotte 2013; West 2012).

Contrary to these depictions of their field, evolutionary psychologists are much less likely to make prescriptivist claims about gender, linguistic or otherwise, than many of the less academic writing that cites them as sources. For comparison, compare this passage from Buss and Schmitt (2011) to the one cited from Pease and Pease (2002) on page seven of this paper:

As a general rule, evolutionary psychologists view manifest behavior as enormously flexible and context-contingent, with the underlying psychological adaptations tending to remain more stable (section: Flexibility: Psychological Adaptations Versus Manifest Behavior, paragraph 2)

Even in the absence of the circumspection with which evolutionary psychologists and biologists make claims, the path from biology to behaviour would clearly be a circuitous one. Fine (2010) has written an entire volume debunking the supposed relationships depicted in the media between sex and behaviour, and repeatedly points out that humans being social animals raised in

cultures where sexism exists makes separating nature from nurture an essentially impossible task. As Medina (2008) puts it, “Boys and girls are treated differently socially the moment they are born, and they are often reared in societies filled with centuries of entrenched prejudice.” (p. 299), a rather surprising caveat from a book named *Brain Rules* by a molecular biologist. There is a palpable fear that the findings of evolutionary psychology justify gender differences as much as they explain them, and this colours the debate on how best to study them (Smith and Konik 2011). Moreover, that fear may be completely rational, as will be discussed in the next section.

4. Conclusions

One must remember that dealing with the public perception of a science means dealing with something more complicated than simple truth claims. Studies reveal that men and women are judged differently even in the absence of any differences besides gender (Tannen 1990). Also, the psychological phenomenon known as *stereotype threat* can prevent people from exercising their full potential in the face of negative stereotypes about groups those people are members of (Ben-Zeev et al. 2005; Sandberg 2013). Given these realities of human society, extra sensitivity to stereotypes and the types of information that can easily lead to the formation of stereotypes may be warranted. In that sense, the attacks that some feminists make against evolutionary psychology may be justifiable regardless of the truth value of its tenets and findings.

It has been written that people are generally poor statistical thinkers (Kahneman 2011). Although almost all of the evidence presented in this paper for gender differences has been statistical, multiple factors conspire to form these into normative generalisations. One is the simple fact that it takes fewer words to outline a stereotype than to explain a statistic, a factor whose influence is not to be underestimated in popular media. The popularity of the difference model may be in its appeal to stereotype, whether intentional or not. In a very statistic-heavy article, Newman et al. (2008) express a similar concern:

Given that our understanding of other human beings is heavily dependent on language, the average differences in communication style that we report are likely to play a central role in the maintenance of gender stereotypes and may perpetuate the perception of a “kernel of

truth” that underlies those stereotypes. (p. 233)

Since models which purport to explain gender differences in speech necessarily have to deal to some extent with gender groups, whether they are socially constructed or biologically determined, extra vigilance on the part of those doing the describing is warranted if scientists do not want their researched truths turned into justifications for prejudice.

(3,232 words)

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