

## MYTHS AND REALITY: GENDER AND LANGUAGE PROBLEMS IN THE MEDIA

*В статье приводится краткий обзор мировой англоязычной прессы по вопросам гендера и языка; сопоставляются взгляды в средствах информации с мнением социолингвистов.*

*The article brings in some gender-related linguistic issues to compare the views in international newspapers with those of sociolinguistics.*

The article looks at gender and language issues and how they are related in the media, by online newspapers, to be exact. The age old question about how much men and women talk has always intrigued people. For the last five decades, relationships between men and women and the language they use have been topics of interest to both the general “public” and sociolinguists. During this period, a lot of research has been conducted to explain the issues surrounding gender and language although no definite answers have been given due to the fact that the topics in question are not of a black-and-white kind.

We think the best way to understand the beliefs and/or misperceptions of the society towards men and women and their language is to examine how the media presents the issues in question.

The only means through which the public has access to research concerning gender and language is the media. It is “the popular press, television programs, the self-help industry, books on popular psychology, [that] relentlessly inform[s] us that women and men are different” [4. P. 717]. Because the public is exposed to a “powerful narrative frame ... that gender is difference, and difference is static, bipolar, and categorical” [3. P. 1], it is almost impossible to move away from perceiving genders through the “difference” framework that tends to underscore the differences between men and women: we think differently, we feel differently, and we speak differently. But the differences are not so straightforward. As Talbot (2003) puts it, “The idea that women and men have distinct styles has proved popular, but it is problematic. While there is extensive research to support such a view..., it needs extensive contextual grounding... “Women” and “men” are not homogeneous groups” [20. P. 475].

For the purpose of identifying how gender and language is dealt with by the media, we googled the keywords “gender and language” under the ‘News’ tab, and came up with a total of fourteen articles from a variety of news sources, national and international. All were published in the period of October—November 2007.

An initial look at these articles revealed that they could best be categorized under three headings: those that report on a recent research done by Leaper and Ayres regarding language use and gender differences, those that review Deborah Cameron’s latest book *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?*, and finally, those that touch upon any aspect of gender and language use in general.

### (1) Reports on the Leaper & Ayres research

When both husband and wife wear pants it is not difficult to tell them apart — he is the one who is listening.

Anonymous

This group comprises newspaper articles that refer to a recent research publication by Leaper and Ayres: *A Meta-Analytic Review of Gender Variations in Adults’ Language Use: Talkativeness, Affiliative Speech, and Assertive Speech*<sup>1</sup>. There are eight articles of this nature, but in only three are the

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<sup>1</sup> Society of Personality and Social Psychology. 2007. November 20.

names of the authors specified. All the articles in this group may be categorized as news articles rather than opinion pieces, which means that they intend to portray facts rather than opinions.

The articles titled *Which is the most talkative gender?* (SAGE Publications, November 2007) and *Poll: Men, women gab about the same* (United Press International, November 9, 2007) mention a Gallup poll first, and then contrast it with the results of Leaper and Ayres' study. They assert that according to the results of the Gallup poll, both men and women consider women to be more talkative: "women are most likely to possess the gift of gab" (*Poll: Men, women gab about the same*, para. 1) and some even "believe women are biologically built for conversation" (*Which is the most talkative gender?*, para. 1). After briefly dwelling on the Gallup poll results, the authors refer to Leaper and Ayres' research, saying that the results disprove the myth: "[The] widespread belief is challenged in research" (*Which is the most talkative gender?*, para 1).

In the same line, *Men just can't stop talking* (Evening Standard, November 11, 2007) introduces the topic by referring to the myth: "...a study which explodes the myth that females just can't stop talking" (para. 1). The author cites Leaper and Ayers, saying that the findings of the study disprove stereotypes of gender differences in language use. Actually, men speak more than women, but "gender differences appear and disappear, depending on the interaction context" (para. 5).

The rest of the articles, on the other hand, include more detailed information from the study regarding the type of speech used by men and women in a variety of contexts. However, they seem to be interpreting the results in slightly different ways. *Men out-chatter women* (Newindpress, November 10, 2007) specifies the situations in which men talk more: "when they talk to groups of people, or to their wives and girlfriends, or strangers," while women "chat more when talking to friends and children [and when talking to strangers] they're likely to find common grounds and interests while men focus on influencing the listener" and "with close friends and family ... there was little difference between genders in the amount of speech" (para. 3 & 4).

In *Women, Not the chatterboxes we thought them to be* (eNews, November 14, 2007), Sophia Keenan specifies the contexts in a slightly different way: men tend to be more talkative "when conversing with their wives or with strangers" while women "[talk] more to their children and to their college classmates" (para. 3 & 4).

Similarly, the article titled *Women not chatterboxes biologically* (The Times of India, November 9, 2007) states that women are talkative with strangers when they use speech to "affirm [their] connection to the listener," while men's speech functions to influence the listener (para. 5). With close friends and family there was little difference between genders in the amount of speech.

The article titled *Men rather than women are chatterboxes says the research* (Newstrack India, November 12, 2007) attributes the difference in talkativeness to the fact that "the controlled conversation that poses them to be less talkative otherwise men talk significantly more than women" [sic] (para. 4). It explains that women talk more to friends and children, while men talk more to wives and girlfriends, from which we can conclude that the differences are cultural and social rather than biological. Interestingly, the article ends in a slightly incoherent manner by referring to gender similarities hypotheses that hold the view that there are more similarities than differences between genders.

This article also stands out from the rest in that it makes use of linguistic terminology: "Aspects of interactive context, measurement quality and publication source were also tested and were called moderator variables" (para. 3), although it seems a bit overloaded with special terms and may present some difficulty for non-specialists. Another inconsistency within this article concerns a reference to a recent bestseller. After mentioning the popularity of the bestseller *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*, the writer refers to "[a]nother one [that] talked of the different cultures of men and women and divided them into different linguistic communities" (para. 6). It is interesting to see that while the writer is concerned about providing scientific terminology, s/he ambiguously refers to a bestseller and has done little research into finding out the name of the book.

The final article titled *Research shows men out-chatter women* (The Telegraph, November 12, 2007), by Lucy Cockcroft, provides more factual information compared to the rest of the articles. She includes quotations from the authors of the study as well as further information regarding studies of children's conversation, which concluded that girls are likely to talk more than boys, but from the age of 13, boys start to out-talk girls.

Stereotyping is "to interpret [someone's] behavior, personality and so on in terms of a set of common-sense attributions which are applied to whole groups" [20. P. 468]. We have always been stereotyping people, and the myths we generate about men and women are examples of stereotyping. One such myth is that women talk more than men. For the last several decades, there has been much research into the amount of talk. Nevertheless, results have not been consistent: some researchers have found that women talk more, and some that men, while others found no difference between men and women. According to James and Drakich (1993), 42.9% of the studies carried out in the period between 1951 and 1991 revealed that males talked more than females, while 3.6% found females to be more talkative, 5.4% concluded that sometimes males and sometimes females talked more depending on the context of the conversation, and 28.6% found no difference in the amount of talk between men and women [8].

Tannen (1990), for instance, believes that "more men feel comfortable doing "public speaking", while more women feel comfortable doing "private" speaking" [21. P. 77]. For example, Eakins and Eakins (as cited in Tannen, 1990), who studied university faculty meetings, concluded that men spoke more often and for a longer time. Tannen states that the reason for this is that men and women have different purposes for speaking. In general, women talk in order to establish connections and negotiate relationships, while men basically talk to "preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order" [21. P. 77].

Similarly, Spender (as cited in Livia, 1995) reports that in a workshop, where five men and thirty-two women participated, the men talked more than half the time. Women participated "by providing back channel support, expressing agreement, linking apparently disparate conversational contributions, and suggesting topics to fill awkward silences" [ 11. P. 247].

In addition, Gal (1995) cites a study by Edelsky (1981) that concluded men dominated the more formal kind of floor, in which speakers took longer and fewer turns and used turns to report facts and opinions, whereas with the less formal kind of floor, where overlap and simultaneous talk took place and for the purpose of communication (e.g., making a suggestion, arguing, agreeing, joking), women and men participated equally. Interestingly, the first kind of floor occurred far more often [5. P. 176].

Going back to the newspaper articles, they seem to present the results of the Leaper and Ayres research as though the myth of women-speak-more was challenged for the first time. However, this is not true because the fact that men speak more in certain contexts has previously been proved many times by sociolinguists. This is not unexpected, for the tendency to oversimplify academic research is typical of today's media.

## **(2) Responses to Cameron's book**

Men are from Earth. Women are from Earth. Deal with it.  
- Feminist postcard

The second group of articles comprises those that refer to linguist Deborah Cameron's bestselling book *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* There has always been a tendency among academic psychologists and linguists to ignore self-help materials [3]. However, nowadays it seems that more and more well-known and respected sociolinguists are writing self-help books, which gain a lot of public popularity. And Cameron's book is no exception.

In the article *Gender Agenda* (The Guardian, October 20, 2007) Steve Poole seems to be in favor of Cameron's theory which states that there are differences between men and women, but they are caused by the way our society is organized. He agrees with Cameron in that the Mars and Venus myth is nothing more than a myth. Accepting Cameron's ideas, Poole claims that the results of previous studies that state that men and women use language differently are "owed to the present gender-biased distribution of social roles" (para. 5), which influence the way people behave and speak. He provides examples from Cameron to debunk the myth of Mars and Venus.

Another review on Deborah Cameron's book is *Do men speak Martian?* (The Telegraph, November 8, 2007) by Kenan Malik, who seems to be less passionate and more objective about the book. First, he claims that it is a well known fact that "women are better communicators than men" (para. 5). Then he refers to Cameron's new book, stating that the myth of Mars and Venus, which has "mutated to scientific belief," (para. 7) cannot be proved by facts, and that in reality careful analysis of all the research on verbal skills of men and women reveal small or no differences at all. The author also agrees that some differences exist only as a result of our social structure. Unlike Steve Poole, Malik focuses on the reasons for the existing differences between men's and women's language use. He says, according to Cameron, the greatest distinction is in the public and private spheres of life, which women and men share (i.e., men have historically been in charge of the public sphere and women, domestic life). A major problem, claims Malik, is that the public's main interest is in the differences but not the similarities between men and women. He thinks there is no doubt this influences the researchers' opinions and data interpretations. In conclusion, the author says that our world cannot be divided into "black and white, pink and blue, Mars and Venus" (para. 18).

Another article that debunks the Mars and Venus theory is *Welcome to OUR planet!* by Nona Walia (Times of India, October 29, 2007). To disprove the myth, the writer turns to Deborah Cameron — "I don't think we need a Mars and Venus theory. We are not aliens from different planets" — and to other figures, who we would assume are popular and well-known by the reader, one of which is an advertiser — Khullar:

If we are discussing relationships then men are from Jupiter (thick) and women are from Saturn (very sensitive and moony), when it comes to making love, men are from Mars (one side hot, the other cool) while women are from Earth (warm and empathetic), and when it comes to showing their feelings, women are from the Moon (cool and glowing) while men are from Planet X (duh!). In short, men and women aren't similar. [sic.] (para. 8)

Walia is also critical of the "industry of psychiatrists, self-help books and relationship gurus" (para.4) that is making money out of the differences between genders.

Today's media — television, newspapers, the Internet, etc. — has been stressing the "difference" between genders. Crawford relates her frustration and disappointment every time she reads an article or book on gender differences: "females and males are routinely compared and when statistically significant differences are found they are discussed and explained. When similarities are found they are considered unremarkable and not in need of explanation" [3. P.2]. In other words, the self-help books related to language and gender, such as Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, tend to point out the differences, but not the similarities. However, in *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* Cameron adopts a different approach:

There is a great deal of similarity between men and women, and the differences within each gender group are typically as great as or greater than the difference between the two. Many differences are context-dependent: patterns that are clear in one context may be muted, nonexistent or reversed in another, suggesting that they are not direct reflections of invariant sex-specific traits (extract from *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, in *Back down to Earth*, 2007).

By focusing on the similarities in the way men and women speak, Cameron seems to be introducing a new outlook to the public. This appears to be a promising sign that the stereotype of the

two different worlds is changing. What is more, the reviews of Cameron's book are positive, which shows that her perspective might come to be accepted by non-sociolinguists.

### (3) Other Articles on Language and Gender Issues

The final group of articles consists of opinion pieces that also deal with some aspects of language and gender.

In *It's time to reconsider gender roles, language in modern relationships* (The Oregon Daily Emerald, October 22, 2007) Jontae Grace holds that the language used in the relationships is outdated. His main interest is in such words and phrases as *breadwinner*, *to call the shots* and *head of household*, which have previously been associated with men. The author also argues that the concept of "a sole breadwinner", which he uses to represent divided responsibilities, contradicts with the modern ideas about roles of men and women in their relationships.

Another article concerning gender stereotypes and language use is *Avoiding gender stereotypes* (The Star, October 26, 2007) by Crystal Smith. The author starts her article by telling a personal anecdote. She confesses that despite her efforts to avoid gender stereotypes, she could not hide her astonishment when her son received a pink telephone as a birthday present. The author claims that gender stereotypes are formed in early childhood, and language plays a very important role in this process. For example, the word *girly* connotes "weak" and "frivolous", which in that sense is actually offensive for both boys and girls. The author then states that parents are responsible for "setting the right example" to their children. She encourages her audience to use gender-neutral language in the household. She also points out that we should avoid words like *chick*, *bimbo* and *air-head* and some others referring to a woman's weight, appearance and clothes, all of which can enhance the formation of stereotypes.

Both Grace and Smith analyze the actual language that used to apply to either men or women and come to the conclusion that we need to reconsider the vocabulary we use because it helps maintain and reinforce gender stereotypes. Thus, they seem to be for the budding idea of moving away from generalizations of this kind.

Connie Glaser's article *Let's talk about e-mail* (Philadelphia Business Journals, November 13, 2007) has the opposite approach to stereotyping. She touches upon gender differences in e-mail communication in the workplace, claiming that just like in everyday communication, at the office too men and women use language for different purposes. That is why, according to Glaser, "men's e-mails tend to be terse and laconic, while women's tend to be voluble and detailed" (para. 4). The author provides several examples that illustrate the differences in men's and women's language: "Man: Why haven't you finished that report yet? Female: I hate to bring that up but have you finished that report yet?" [sic] (para. 6). She concludes by suggesting some tips on how to write e-mails "that may help win the 'battle of genders' and reduce misunderstanding at work." For instance, she suggests that men "acknowledge e-mail response with at least one complete sentence" and "[s]kip the sarcasm" and women "use a professional tone... and avoid getting too personal [and] avoid using smiley faces and excessive exclamation marks that can prevent [them] from taken seriously" (para. 8 & 9).

The written mode of e-mail communication shares a lot of properties with spoken interaction and therefore the same stereotypes about gender differences in language apply to e-mail. By separating men's and women's writing styles in her do's and don'ts, Glaser seems to be promoting gender stereotyping.

### Conclusion

Mass media has always influenced and reflected the public's opinions and beliefs, and very often it is the only means through which scientific research, and sociolinguistic research in particular is brought to the folk. Our analysis has revealed the general tendency to over-generalize traits and ste-

reotype people seems to have started to change. For example, the first group of articles brings it home to public that the belief that women talk more is nothing more than a myth. There also seems to be a very subtle change in the perception of gender differences in the eyes of the public. The reviews on Cameron's book show that it is time to recognize the similarities between the two genders rather than underline their differences. Though a change in perception appears to be taking place, it is still too soon to openly state such a change, as revealed by Glaser's article *Let's talk about e-mail*, which highlights the differences between men's and women's language.

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