

Genderlect

ENCARNACIÓN HIDALGO-TENORIO
University of Granada, Spain

“Genderlect” is a controversial concept that finds its origins in the field of early sociolinguistics, after Weinrich’s (1953) claim that sex can be a relevant variable in language contact situations, and that has repeatedly been argued to reinforce social stereotyping (Motschenbacher 2007). As early as 1944, Haas distinguished three different gender dialect systems based on the gender of, respectively, the addresser and the addressee, or on the combination of both. It was only in the 1970s that the term “genderlect” was first used in the linguistics literature, where it refers to a language variety explained on the grounds of speaker gender/sex (Kramer 1974; Haas 1979). Other situational and demographic variables such as race, ethnicity group, age, job, social class, family income, as well as sociocultural and educational backgrounds, were already being examined as factors potentially influencing linguistic performance (Labov 1972). Accordingly, apart from its traditional interest in regional dialects, this branch of linguistics encouraged the exploration of other “-lects” such as agelects, classlects, sociolects, idiolects, and sex- or genderlects.

Given that this field of study promoted an essentialist and dualist conception of gender, genderlects were claimed to have invariable distinct features deriving from the different linguistic codes, communicative styles, or verbal repertoires of both women and men (Holmes 1996), even if such distinctions were not considered exclusive, but rather a question of frequency or preference (Bodine 1975). Linguistics experts have

largely focused on the female genderlect, often regarded as a deviation from the male (grammatical, phonological, and lexical) norm. In addition to being rather biased in some respects, this trend of investigation tends to rely on exotic and anecdotal instances, or on relics of the past. This happens to be the case with small communities on the Eurasian continent, Australia, and the Americas (for a description of Irish Sign Language, Kūṛux, Kalmyk, Yanyuwa, Tangoan, Chukchi, Arawaka, Kokama, Pirahā, or Awetí, see Dunn 2014). These particular examples prove the established social segregation of the genders.

Research from Glück (1979) onward has shown that gender by itself does not have an effect on people’s language use (Hall 2003). Although the idea, initially, could look self-evident and more than appealing, nowadays it is untenable to believe that this is an individual influential factor on subjects’ language variation. Communication is a complex, context-dependent phenomenon in which numerous interrelated variables operate simultaneously. This position is supported by the dynamic, or diversity, approach to the study of language and gender, one of the four strands distinguished in Coates’s (1986) taxonomy, the other three being the deficit, dominance, and difference models.

In 1922, Jespersen mentioned earlier ethnographical works that suggested the existence of separate languages for the two sexes, or “sex dialects.” In his chapter entitled “The Woman,” he defines differences between male and female language in terms of lexicon range, complexity of syntactic structures, verbal taboo, usage of local vernacular, degree of formality, positive politeness, and verbosity. His impressionistic, but pioneering, paper resulted in the view of female linguistic style

as an inferior version of standard male speech patterns. Much later, Lakoff's (1975) influential writings extended this view. Although she does not employ the term, one of the senses of her notion of "women's language" is synonymous with genderlect, that is, the language women are likely to use to talk and write. In its other sense, "women's language" was meant to refer to the language used to speak about women. Key to Lakoff's account, which is lacking in a solid empirical basis, is women's inclination to linguistic conservatism, hypercorrection, and overt prestige (i.e., to resort to a variety widely recognized as being employed mainly by a culturally dominant group), as well as their tendency to choose trivial subject matters, and to prefer qualifiers or lexemes with emotive connotations, diminutives, terms of endearment, evaluative expressions, or vocabulary centered on stereotypically feminine activity. This "deficit model" additionally reinforces the idea that female speakers' lack of confidence is shown through hesitations, tag questions, rising intonation in declarative sentences, and epistemic modal markers such as "if," "would," "maybe," "probably," "I think," or "I don't know whether."

Thorne and Henley (1975), and Zimmerman and West (1975) are proponents of the "dominance approach." Building on the deficit model, this rejects the former's simplistic arguments in favor of men's linguistic superiority, and explains male speakers' conversational domination of women primarily on account of the latter's less assertive attitude, which springs from their having been denied access to the language of power. Who selects the topic of the communicative exchange, who controls the amount of talk or the turn taking, who backchannels and with whom, who overlaps, who interrupts and who is interrupted (Bilious and Krauss 1988; Herring, Johnson, and DiBenedetto 1995) are all aspects of language use that prove that the

hierarchical social relationship between the sexes is also maintained through language (Kollock, Blumstein, and Schwartz 1985).

Popularized by Tannen (1990), the main tenet of the "difference theory," which is rooted in interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982) and ethnography of communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1986), is that men and women belong to different subcultures, and that this is the reason for their linguistic behaviors. Men tend to report, to lecture, and to confront, their attitude reflecting their status and independence, whereas women tend to listen, agree, and support, as well as to seek rapport and intimacy (see Talbot 1998).

Rather than discussing male and female language, Maltz and Borker (1982) propose the idea of different communicative styles (i.e., the cooperative and the competitive styles) which they do not ascribe to any gender in particular, even if, in practice, they come to be identified as such. Whilst the cooperative style is useful for the flow of communication, the competitive style is helpful, especially, to look for information. It is from here that the seeds of the "diversity approach" emerge, based on the following premise: gender is not something we have or are, but something we do (Holstein and Miller 1993); that is why gender identity is understood as a fluid construct rather than a natural given (Butler 1990). Moreover, men and women do not form homogeneous groups; therefore, there cannot be one male genderlect and one female genderlect which all men and all women share. In the knowledge that some differences have been attested, and that immediate association between them and gender may be established, all sorts of registers can still serve the purpose of their reproduction in order to cause certain social effects. All things considered, while communicating, people adjust to the requirements of the situational context and the social

practices they are engaged in, which allows them to adopt a range of speaking roles that have their own distinctive linguistic reflexes, irrespective of the speaker's sex and gender.

SEE ALSO: Discourse and Gender; Discursive Theories of Gender; Double Standard; Essentialism; Language and Gender

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