

## /LANGUAGE, SEX, AND COMMUNICATION:

### Implications for Research in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

JUDITH M. BUNYI  
*De La Salle University*

The speech communication discipline has always recognized its interface with linguistics, for the study of the human communication process practically necessitates the study of the nature of language and how a speaker, through his or her choice and use of language, can most effectively engender his or her intended meaning within the listener/s. Oral communication is basically multisymbolic behavior (Baird and Knowler 1960) and language, being one of the symbols utilized by man, 'is the heart of communication' (White 1978).

Just as language and oral communication are inextricably linked, so are speech and sex, according to Edward T. Hall (1959). He goes on to say 'Let the reader, if he doubts this, start talking like a member of the opposite sex for a while and see how long people let him get away with it' (50).

This paper addresses the issue of the role of language and sex in oral communication and its implications for communication research, particularly in the Philippine setting.

To a large extent, the birth and growth of the women's movement in the West spurred great interest in sex-based differences in language, although a treatise on the subject appeared as early as 1900 (Frazer). 'The study of sex difference in English is now coming into its own', note Thorne and Henley (1975). In the Philippines, however, the pioneering research of Montenegro (1981) remains one of the very few descriptions of male and female language in Pilipino. With limited generalizability, the results of the Montenegro study show that differences, as well as similarities, exist in the language of both sexes.

At this juncture, it should be pointed out that language differentiation per se between men and women would be of little import unless it can be seen to have some influence, whether negative or positive, on the communicative behavior of individuals in same- or opposite-sex interactions.

Where opposite-sex interactions are concerned, evidence for sexual stereotyping of languages has been found. For example, 'one stereotype with empirical support', according to Thorne and Henley, 'is that women's speech is more polite, "correct" and "proper" than the speech of men' (17). The female language characteristic has been explained by Trudgill (1975) in the following manner:

The social position of women in our society is less secure than that of men, and, usually, subordinate to that of men. It may be, therefore, that it is more necessary for women to secure and signal their social status linguistically . . . (91).

Males, on the other hand, have always enjoyed higher status and their dominance 'is strikingly apparent in the content of words, in language *about* women and men' (Thorne and Henley 1975: 15).

Much has been written about the male dominance-female subordination phenomena both as a function of and as reflected in sex differentiation in language. Thorne and Henley provide a comprehensive review of literature on this subject in the book *Language and sex: Difference and dominance*. While the literature provides us with some interesting data about and insights into this field of study, one must remember that

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most of the studies were done in primarily Western culture and, therefore, the question of generalizability to Asian and, particularly, the Philippine, context must be raised.

In order to determine the universality of such differentiations in language as reflected in the communication behavior of individuals, replication studies must be conducted to allow for cross-cultural comparisons. One must start, however, with the identification of variables that relate to features of both language and the communication act.

As to linguistic distinctions, the classification used by Thorne and Henley in their annotated bibliography on sex differences in language, speech, and nonverbal communication provides a practical framework for studying male-female language. Their classification includes the following categories: (1) vocabulary and syntax, with subcategories pertaining to sexist bias in language and sex differences in word choice, syntactic usage, and language style; (2) Phonology, which includes phonetic variants and suprasegmentals such as pitch, intonation, and speech interruptions, topic preference and control of topic; and (4) Verbal ability, which can refer either to fluency or to speech disturbances.

In 1973, Vicencio conducted a descriptive study of non-fluencies (factors that disrupt fluency) that commonly occur in impromptu speeches of public speaking students. She found that females in the sample incurred more repetitions and left more words hanging while males engaged in self-corrections. In this study, however, no attempt was made to explain the existence of such variations.

Factors in the communication situation offer another viable approach for assessing linguistic differences based on sex. A more systematic analysis could perhaps be made if the Thorne and Henley classification is used in conjunction with the communication framework. For example, in order to determine gender variations in the language of the speaker or message source, one may look at style, i.e. how the speaker chooses and uses language, and verbal ability. If one were to examine the speaker's credibility in relation to language, the researcher may focus on vocabulary and syntax and study, for instance, the presence or absence of tag questions, defined by Lakoff (1975) as 'midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question . . .' as in 'That's an interesting idea, isn't it?' (54) and the use of disclaimers, which are 'introductory expressions that excuse, explain, or request understanding or forbearance'. Some examples of disclaimers are: 'This may sound a little strange, but . . .' or 'I could be mistaken, but . . .' (Eakins and Eakins 1978: 45). Women's language, often characterized by tag questions and disclaimers 'encourage(s) expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it', according to Lakoff (48). If such is the case, a female speaker's credibility might then be questioned and eventually decrease.

In an empirical investigation, Bradley (1981) sought to determine the impact of the use of these two linguistic features on an individual's persuasive ability in small groups. She found that 'when women used tag questions and disclaimers, they were perceived less positively and functioned less influentially than did women who voiced their views more directly and with greater certainty in small group settings' (19).

Before cross-cultural comparisons of this aspect can be made, however, it would be necessary to resolve the question of whether or not there exists, for example, a Pilipiño, Ilocano, Pampango, or Cebuano equivalent for tag questions and disclaimers, and if so, whether or not they function in the same manner as their English counterparts.

Another key variable in the communication situation, besides the speaker, is the receiver or listener. The listener, whether male or female, enters the communication transaction with his or her purpose, attitudes, and skills, language or otherwise. These factors may be brought to bear upon the nature and direction of the flow of communication. Again, in mixed-sex interactions, particularly in dyadic (two-person) and small group situations, the amount of speech, interruptions, i.e. who was interrupted and by whom, and topic preference can possibly be controlled by the listener.

The communication event has been conceptualized as continuous and cyclical in nature, such that the roles of sending and receiving messages cycle. This being the case, a female who initially plays the role of message sender may well find herself switching roles permanently with a male listener, possibly because of the tendency of males to 'assert an asymmetrical right to control topics and do so without evident repercussions',

according to Zimmerman and West (1975: 125). These researchers conclude, after studying thirty-one conversational segments recorded in coffee shops, drug stores, and other public places in a university community, that, 'at least in their transcripts, men deny equal status to women as conversational partners with respect to rights to the full utilization of their turns and support for the development of topics' (125). The validity of this finding, however, must be tested across situations and across communicator demographic characteristics, including language and culture.

Montenegro, for example, asserts that 'the Filipino woman enjoys a unique place in our society in that she is equal to the Filipino man in almost every aspect' (1981:5-6). If so, one may not possibly observe the same phenomenon which Zimmerman and West did. But if one finds similar occurrences within the Philippine context, the question becomes why such language behavior is exhibited in spite of the seeming equal treatment accorded to both the Filipino man and woman.

The third communication variable which can be examined in relation to sex differences in language is the message, i.e. the content, structure, and style of the verbal stimulus.

In the literature on small group communication, one of the factors that have been found to influence leadership emergence was competence or skill. In a controlled laboratory study of leadership emergence in small, heterogeneous groups, Bunyi (1982) found, based upon a sample of college students, that group members' choice of actual and future leaders was a function not of sex but whether or not a discussant was perceived as task-oriented. Task orientation or task competence was operationally defined in the study as (1) providing appropriate suggestions relating to discussion procedure and content, (2) providing sound opinions, evaluation, or analysis, and (3) giving information relevant to the problem, as well as clarifying and confirming the ideas presented by others. These items correspond to the DEF categories in Bales' (1950) Interaction Process Analysis scheme. The Bunyi study implies that the content of communication plays a more crucial role in leadership emergence than sex. It implies further that when the female discussant exhibits verbal behavior which is associated more with males in small group decision-making activities, she will be accorded leadership status normally reserved for males. Additional research, however, is still needed to ascertain more precisely which factors contribute to an individual's being acknowledged or overlooked as leader, and, whether or not the same can be said of, say, a Filipino sample.

Montenegro has done well in identifying what linguistic features are present in male and female language in Pilipino. How these linguistic features operate during communication interactions with members of the same or opposite sex needs to be examined further.

Another potential area for investigation, which can still be categorized under message content, is humor, 'that quality in a happening, an action, a situation, or any expression of ideas, which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous' (Webster 1977). Questions such as who initiates the use of humor, to whom is it directed, and, more importantly, what is the nature or content of the humorous expression, may be asked in addition to the basic, underlying question of gender differences.

Santos (1973), in her article 'The Mirth Experience: As Viewed by Seventeen Speech I Students', analyzed samples of impromptu speeches made by students in public speaking. Based upon the limited samples in her study, she found that students used a combination of two or more of the following types of humor: satire, understatement, irony, burlesque, and raillery. The study, however, remains descriptive at best. There was no attempt at making a systematic comparison in the types of humor employed by either sex.

Since humor occurs at almost all levels of communication, it may be worth our while to analyze the differences, if there are, between male and female speakers' use of humor at the levels of interpersonal, group, organizational, or public communication.

Still another area that might prove interesting in terms of content would be advertisements. Goffman (1976) documented gender displays 'in commercial advertising through visually accessible behavioral style' (84). Although commercial photographs and

mass media advertisements primarily speak through 'carefully performed poses', the language, spoken or written, that accompanies such pictorial stimuli may, nonetheless, furnish us with direct or subtle cues relating to sex-based linguistic differentiation.

Structure is another aspect of message content. According to the Ehninger, Gronbeck, and Monroe (1980),

structure may be direct or circuitous, loose or compact, clear or confusing. It may, at one extreme, entail no more than the ordering of a few sentences, or . . . require the strategic structuring of large-scale units of thought. But because we can express only one idea at a time, we always must make a choice as to what to say first, second, or last, and in so doing, we inevitably give the message a certain structure (7).

Investigation, therefore, in this area, in relation to language, sex, and communication may revolve around the issue of whether males or females employ differing structures which are unique only to their respective gender, and if so, would crossing the barrier, for example, a female speaker using a 'masculine' message structure, adversely affect the way a listener/s respond to the speaker and his or her message?

In the communicative event, the message is transmitted from speaker to listener through one or a combination of the following channels: the verbal (words), the visual (non-verbal or physical delivery), the pictorial (visual aids), and the aural (otherwise termed as paralinguistic medium such as variations in vocal modulations) (Ehninger, Gronbeck, and Monroe 1980:9). This fourth communication variable – channels – as well as the fifth variable – situation – may also be studied along the theme of sex differentiation in language.

The communication situation or the context in which a given interaction takes place may or may not make a difference in male and female use of language. For instance, are there similarities or dissimilarities among same- and opposite-sex communicative exchanges that occur within the family, academe, business and industrial setting, the military, etc.? Are there variations in the linguistic pattern of females when they are in a subordinate role such as daughter or secretary? When they are in a superior position such as mother, teacher, or manager? Or when they function as men's equals?

Baird and Bradley (1979) conducted a comparative investigation of male and female styles of management and communication. Where men and women function on the same managerial level, they found that

In communication content, women statistically exceeded men in giving information, stressing interpersonal relations, being receptive to ideas, and encouraging effort; in communication style, males generally exceeded females in dominance, being quick to challenge others, and directing the course of conversations, while females scored higher on showing concern and being attentive to others (108).

Studies of this nature should be replicated in the Philippines to find out whether or not the same conclusions may be drawn.

Suffice it to say at this point that much more remains to be done. The list drawn here, taken primarily from linguistics and the speech communication discipline, is by no means exhaustive and far from being complete. As Thorne and Henley aptly put it

The questions are endless, the answers are few, but the search for them is expanding. The important thing about this field (whether all of its scholars recognize it or not) is that here is socially useful study, study that will shape our future, even as it interprets our past. Language exists not in a social vacuum but at the very core of human interaction. As the study of gender and language uncovers the answers to old questions, not only will new questions emerge, but the very situation itself, at the nexus of language, gender, . . . society (and, may I add, communication) will be changed (1975: 31).

Why, then, should we study language, sex, and communication? Because ' . . . sex is a variable central to language' (Thorne and Henley 1975: 10) and 'language is the heart of communication' (White 1978: 317) and communication is inevitable (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1967).

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