

## GENDER AND LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT

*In this review study, the differences between women and men in language learning and acquisition process are examined from different perspectives as sex-based or gender-based theoretically. Basic definitions related to gender and sex in literature review have been presented and discussed by dealing with the findings of various researches. Afterwards, the studies carried out on sex-based differences have been investigated to explain why males and females think and learn differently. On this direction it is discussed how sex-role stereotyping and gender bias begin and develop. In addition, it is mentioned the relationship between language and gender. Finally in this study the effects of sex and gender on first language acquisition and second language acquisition are defined.*

**Keywords:** Sex, gender, language

## CİNSİYET VE DİL

### ÖZET

*Derleme türü bu çalışmada dil öğrenme ve edinme sürecinde kadın ve erkek arasındaki en önemli farklılıklardan biri kabul edilen cinsiyet faktörü sosyal veya biyolojik temelli olarak iki farklı bakış açısıyla kuramsal olarak ele alınmıştır. Araştırmada öncelikle cinsiyet kavramının alan yazınla ilgili bilimsel çalışmalarda yer alan biyolojik (male-female) ve sosyal (feminine-masculine) açıdan tanımları verilmiştir. Daha sonra kadın ve erkeğin biyolojik temelde farklı bilim alanlarında farklı düşünüp öğrenmeleri ile ilgili araştırmalara yer verilmiştir. Bu bağlamda biyolojik temelli cinsiyet rol ve sosyal temelli cinsiyet önyargılarının nasıl başlayıp geliştiği tartışılmıştır. Ayrıca bu çalışmada dil ve cinsiyetin sosyal yönü arasındaki ilişki üzerinde durulmuştur. Son olarak ana dil ve ikinci dil ediniminde cinsiyetin sosyal ve biyolojik temelleri tartışılmıştır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Biyolojik açıdan cinsiyet, sosyal açıdan cinsiyet, dil

### Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the theme of men and women metaphorically ‘speaking different languages’ has become very common in popular culture. According to books like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, women love to talk, whereas men prefer action to words. Women view talking as a way

of connecting with others emotionally, whereas men treat conversation either as a practical tool or a competitive sport. Women are good at listening, building rapport with others and avoiding or defusing conflict; men confront each other more directly, and are less attuned to either their own or others' feelings (Gray, 1992: 21). More recently, a new wave of popular scientific writing has linked these observations to differences in the way male and female brains work (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Brizendine, 2006). One study of Australian school children's attitudes to foreign language learning found that pupils as young as 12 knew all the 'Mars and Venus' clichés. 'Girls can do languages – that's how their brains are', said one boy. Another commented: 'Girls enjoy talk: it's what they do, what they're good at'. Most of the girls agreed that 'boys are hopeless communicators!' (Carr and Pauwels, 2006: 146).

But when you embark on the academic study of language and gender, you will quickly notice how different it is in its assumptions, questions, methods and conclusions. Academic researchers, unlike popular writers, do not equate studying gender with cataloguing differences between men and women. The more evidence has accumulated from studying men and women in a range of communities and contexts, the clearer it has become that generalizations along the lines of 'men use language like this and women use it like that' may be accepted as oversimplification.

### **Sex or Gender?**

The British sociologist Giddens (1989) defines sex as biological or anatomical differences between male and female, whereas gender concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between man and woman. In other words, sex is something you have, and it can be defined in terms of objective, scientific criteria- that is, the number of X chromosomes a person has. Gender, on the other hand, is social property: something acquired or constructed through your relationships with others through an individual's adherence to certain cultural norms and proscriptions. Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we *have*, but something we *do*– something we *perform* (Butler, 1990: 302). Imagine a small boy proudly following his father. As he swaggers and sticks out his chest, he is doing everything he can to be like his father - to be a *man*. Chances are his father is not swaggering, but the boy is creating a persona that embodies what he is admiring in his adult male role model. The same is true of a small girl as she puts on her mother's high-heeled shoes, smears makeup on her face and minces around the room. Chances are that when these children are grown they will not swagger and mince respectively, but their childhood performances contain elements that will no doubt surface in their adult male and female behaviors. Chances are, also, that the girl will adopt that swagger on occasion as well, but adults are not likely to consider it her mincing as "cute" as her mincing act. Chances are that if the boy decides to try a little mincing, he won't be considered cute at all. In other words, gendered performances are available to everyone, but with them constraints

come on who can perform which personae with impunity. And this is where gender and sex come together, as society tries to match up ways of behaving with biological sex assignments (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 121).

Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. Gender builds on biological sex, it exaggerates biological difference and, indeed, it carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant. There is no biological reason, for example, why women should mince and men should swagger, or why women should like to have their nails polished and men should not. But while we think of sex as biological and gender as social, this distinction is not clear-cut. People tend to think of gender as the result of nurture -as social and hence fluid -while sex is simply given by biology. However, there is no obvious point at which sex leaves off and gender begins, partly because there is no single objective biological criterion for male or female sex. Sex is based in a combination of anatomical, endocrinal and chromosomal features, and the selection among these criteria for sex assignment is based very much on cultural beliefs about what actually makes someone male or female. Thus the very definition of the biological categories *male* and *female*, and people's understanding of themselves and others as male or female, is ultimately social. Fausto-Sterling sums up the situation as follows "...labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender -not science-can define our sex. Furthermore, our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place (2000: 3)."

It is commonly argued that biological differences between males and females determine gender by causing enduring differences in capabilities and dispositions. Higher levels of testosterone, for example, are said to lead men to be more aggressive than women; and left-brain dominance is said to lead men to be more "rational" while their relative lack of brain lateralization should lead women to be more "emotional." But the relation between physiology and behavior is not simple, and it is all too easy to leap for gender dichotomies. It has been shown that hormonal levels, brain activity patterns, and even brain anatomy can be a result of different activity as well as a cause. For example research with species as diverse as monkeys (Rose et al., 1972) and fish (Fox et al., 1997) has documented changes in hormone levels as a result of changes in social position. Work on sex differences in the brain is very much in its early stages, and as Fausto-Sterling (2000: 647) points out in considerable detail, it is far from conclusive. What is supposed to be the most robust finding - that women's corpus callosum, the link between the two brain hemispheres, is relatively larger than men's - is still anything but robust. Men's smaller corpus callosum is supposed to result in greater lateralization, while women's larger one is supposed to yield greater integration between the two hemispheres, at least in visuo-spatial functions. But given that evidence for sex-linked brain

differences in humans is based on very small samples, often from sick or injured populations, generalizations about sex differences are shaky at best. In addition, not that much is known about the connections between brain physiology and cognition - hence about the consequences of any physiological differences scientists may be seeking or finding. Nonetheless, any results that might support physiological differences are readily snatched up and combined with any variety of gender stereotypes in some often quite fantastic leaps of logic. The products of these leaps can in turn feed directly into social, and particularly into educational policy with arguments that gender equity in such “leftbrain areas” as mathematics and engineering is impossible.

### **Do Males and Females Think and Learn differently?**

The question of gender differences in intelligence or academic achievement has been debated for centuries, and the issue has taken on particular importance since the early 1970s. The most important thing to keep in mind about this debate is that no responsible researcher has ever claimed that any male-female differences on any measure of intellectual ability are large in comparison to the amount of variability within each sex. In other words, even in areas in which true gender differences are suspected, these differences are so small and so variable that they have few practical consequences (Fennema, Carpenter, Jacobs, Franke and Levi, 1998). Far more important are differences caused by cultural expectations and norms. For example, twelfth-grade girls score significantly lower than boys on the quantitative section of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) (Gallagher and De Lisi, 1994) and on Advanced Placement tests in mathematics (Stumpf and Stanley, 1996). A summary of 20 major studies shows that males scored better than females in math, whereas the opposite was true on English tests. Surprisingly, males scored better on multiple choice tests, but not on other formats. There may be a biological basis for such differences, but none has been proven. The most important cause is that females in our society have traditionally been discouraged from studying mathematics and therefore take many fewer math courses than males do. In fact, as females have begun to take more math courses over the past two decades, the gender gap on the SAT and on other measures has been steadily diminishing (Fennema, et al., 1998: 278).

Bearing these cautions in mind, note that studies generally find that males score higher than females on tests of general knowledge, mechanical reasoning, and mental rotations; females score higher on language measures, including reading and writing assessments, and on attention and planning tasks (Warrick and Naglieri, 1993). There are no male-female differences in general verbal ability, arithmetic skills, abstract reasoning, spatial visualization, or memory span (Fennema et al., 1998). There is an interesting argument about variability of performance in certain areas. For example, Feingold has argued that males are more variable than females in quantitative reasoning-that is, that there are more very high-achieving males and more very low-achieving males

than there are females in either category (1992: 47). Studies of students who are extremely gifted in mathematics consistently find a substantially higher number of males than females in this category: However, there is still a lively debate about the idea that males are more variable than females in intellectual abilities (Bielinski and Davison, 1998: 353-4).

In school grades, females start out with an advantage over males and maintain this advantage into high school. Even in math and science, in which females score somewhat lower on tests, females still get better grades in class (Maher and Ward, 2002). Despite this, high school males tend to overestimate their skills in language and math, while females underestimate their skills. In elementary school, males are much more likely than females to have reading problems and are much more likely to have learning disabilities or emotional disorders (Smith, 1991).

### **Sex-Role Stereotyping and Gender Bias**

If there are so few genetically based differences between males and females, why do so many behavioral differences exist? These behavioral differences originate from different experiences, including reinforcement by adults for different types of behavior.

Male and female babies have traditionally been treated differently from the time they are born. The wrapping of the infant in either a pink or a blue blanket symbolizes the variations in experience that typically greet the child from birth onward. In early studies, adults described boy or girl babies wrapped in blue blankets as being more active than the same babies wrapped in pink. Other masculine traits were also ascribed to those wrapped in blue (Baxter, 1994). Although gender bias awareness has begun to have some impact on child-rearing practices, children do begin to make gender distinctions and have gender preferences around the age of 3 or 4. Thus, children enter school having been socialized into appropriate gender-role behavior for their age in relation to community expectations (Delamont, 2001). Differences in approved gender roles between boys and girls tend to be much stronger in low- Social Economic Situated families than in high- SES families (Flanagan, 1993).

Socialization into this kind of approved sex-role behavior continues throughout life, and schools contribute to it. Though interactions between socialization experiences and achievement are complex and it is difficult to make generalizations, schools differentiate between the sexes in a number of ways. In general, males receive more attention from their teachers than females do. Males receive more disapproval and blame from their teachers than females do, but they also engage in more interactions with their teachers in such areas as approval, instruction giving, and being listened to. Teachers tend to punish females more promptly and explicitly for aggressive behavior than they do males. Torrance (1986) found that the creative behavior of males was rewarded by teachers three times oftener than that of females. Other differentiations are subtle, as girls are directed to play in the house corner while

boys are provided with blocks or when boys are given the drums to play in music class, girls are given the triangles.

### **Development of Gender Roles**

As for all aspects of human development, there are two main influences on the development of gender role: genetics and environment. Although it has not been proved completely yet, there are strong indications that some male-female differences are biological. Lefrancois (1997) states that the greater aggressiveness of males relative to females is a good example for the idea that the differences come from biology. Males tend to be more aggressive not only in most human societies, but also among most non-human animal species. Male aggressiveness may be linked to the presence of male hormones as when females are given testosterone injections, they too tend to become more aggressive.

The effect of environment can be named as the influence of social roles and expectations. In spite of the biological aggressiveness of males, the roles assigned by the society to an individual is a determining factor in the different male and female behaviors. Lefrancois (1997) exemplifies this with the following: when young American children are asked which personality characteristics are masculine and which are feminine, they typically have no problem in agreeing on the characteristics for each gender. That may be because in North American societies, most occupations and many sports requiring aggression have traditionally been restricted to males while non-aggressive and more nurturant behavior to females. Society provides children with clear models and children see them everywhere: at home, on tv, on playground and at school. The message they got as a result of this is that there are behaviors, occupations, interests and attitudes that are clearly appropriate for one gender but inappropriate for the other.

More interestingly, in a study by Kelly and Grotton (cited in Lefrancois, 1997), it was indicated that masculine roles are more constraining than feminine roles. While, it is acceptable for girls to show masculine interests and to engage in masculine activities, it is less acceptable for boys to be feminine. Girls in trousers are acceptable in a way that boys in dresses will probably never be. Both boys and girls generally agree that the masculine role is the preferable role. When boys and girls in the study are asked ‘if you wake up tomorrow and discover that you were girl (boy) how would your life be different?’, ‘terrible’, or ‘that would be catastrophe’, or ‘a disaster’ the boys answered. But the girls responded very differently. They said ‘great’. The study shows that boys saw girls as more passive, weaker, more restricted in activities and more emotional. However, girls viewed boys as more active, less concerned with appearance, more aggressive, more athletic and better able to travel and develop a career.

Woolfolk (1980:175) introduces the term ‘gender-role identity’ which is the image each individual has of himself or herself as masculine or feminine in characteristics- a part of self-concept. People with a ‘feminine’ identity would

rate themselves high on characteristics usually associated with males, such as 'sensitive' or 'warm', and low on characteristics traditionally associated with males, such as 'forceful' and 'competitive'. The question how gender role identities develop can be answered in two ways. Firstly, the role of biology can be mentioned. Hormones affect the activity level and aggression; therefore, boys tend to prefer active, rough and noisy play while girls prefer plays that require less activity. Secondly, social and cognitive factors can be regarded as affecting the gender-role identity. As an example to this it can be said that parents are more likely to react positively to assertive behavior on the part of their sons and emotional sensitivity in their daughters. Through their interactions with family, peers, teachers and the environment, children begin to form as Woolfolk (1980) calls it 'gender schemas' or 'organized networks of knowledge' about what it means to be male or female. Gender schemas help children make sense of the world and guide their behavior. So a young girl, whose schema for girls includes girls play with dolls and not with trucks, will remember and interact more with dolls than trucks (Liben and Signorella, cited in Woolfolk, 1980).

### **Gender and Language**

It is not a myth that gender influences language use-but that is not simply because men and women are naturally different kinds of people. Rather, gender influences linguistic behavior because of its impact on other things that influence linguistic behavior more directly. The way people use language can be related to the social network they belong to, their habitual activities, their identities as particular kinds of people and their status relative to others. Each of these things is potentially affected by gender divisions which are characteristics of our society. As Cameron (2000) claims, there is a complex relationship between language and gender in the academic studies of language and gender. Holmes (cited in Bergwall 1999) formulates six candidate universals regarding language and gender:

1. Women and men develop different patterns of language use
2. Women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do.
3. Women tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more often than men do.
4. Women tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase solidarity, while especially in formal contexts men tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase their power and status.
5. Women use more standard forms than men from the same social group in the same social context.
6. Women are stylistically more flexible than men.

Although there are dangers in seeking generalizations as above, Holmes's formulations support the common assumption that there may be some common

ground underlying the linguistic positions of women and men in the world (Bergwall, 1999).

### **Community of Practice (CofP) Theory**

Community of Practice Theory helps in understanding human behavior and particularly linguistic behavior. The term Community of Practice was introduced to language and gender research by Echert and McConnell-Ginnet (1992). They define CofP as follows:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values power relations- in short practices- emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages (1992:464).

Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) state that the process of becoming a member of a CofP- as when one joins a new workplace, a book group, or a new family (e.g through marriage)- involves learning. When someone learns to perform appropriately in a CofP according to their membership status, they initially become a peripheral member but later become a core member. Thus, a CofP inevitably involves the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. In other words, members of a community influence each other in their behaviors or activities. When somebody joins a new group, he is like an apprentice. In order to be a member of a group, they first observe the activities and practices of other group members and they adjust their behaviors according to the group's, namely community's expectations. They subconsciously acquire the behaviors that are expected from them. These behaviors also include some specific aspects of language structure, discourse, and interaction patterns.

Recent research on the relationships between language and gender claim that gender is socially constructed in interaction, rather than existing as a fixed social category, to which individuals are assigned at birth. Thus, CofP theory supports the idea that the way we use language is learned from the people around us. For a male baby, for instance, stereotypes like father and brother in the community of family affect the way he acquires the language while for a female one mother and sister have the major influence.

Parelleling to this, Ponyton (1985) states that all members of society is important but parents and educators are important in particular because they are the primary agents of the society in the socialization of children into these institutionalized attitudes. It is from their mouths that children hear the words, and the ways of speaking, that will eventually become their words, their ways of speaking.

### **Gender/Sex and First Language Acquisition**

General acceptance about children's way of learning their mother tongue is quite straightforward; it is natural and without striking a blow. There is always difference in talent when children study other knowledge, for

example, some children are good at mathematics, while others have a talent for physics. However, there is little difference in mother tongue acquisition. Although children's living environments differ in thousands of ways and experiences in physics and intelligence are totally different, these differences do not influence their acquisition of mother tongue at all. Five or six-year-olds, regardless of their gender, have the same language ability roughly despite their different language environments. It's easy for children to learn their mother tongue and acquire language ability unconsciously (Li and Bu, 2006). However, there are also several studies of first language acquisition (Douglas, 1964; Morris, 1966) that have shown girls to be better learners than boys. Trudgill (1974) showed that women used the prestige variants more frequently than men and related this phenomenon to female social insecurity. Differences between male and female L1 learners appear more in studies conducted in bilingual settings; and such studies favor female learners in acquiring the languages they are exposed to. In a study of Punjabi migrant children in England, Agnihotri showed that girls assimilated the prestige variants faster than the boys; they were also better at resisting the stigmatised variants (1979). Satyanath, too, found that Kannadiga women in Delhi showed a higher percentage of assimilation of linguistic features associated with Hindi and also a higher degree of usage than men. He found that younger women assimilated the host society's language and culture maximally (1982). Unlike Trudgill, who holds social insecurity to be responsible for greater use of prestige variants, Satyanath attributes it to the sociocultural aspects of the Kannadiga community, which provides women a greater opportunity of interaction with the host society and this seems to be the underlying reason in female learners outscoring their counterparts (1974).

### **Gender/Sex and Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

SLA, which is a sub area of applied linguistics, has become a genuine field of research for the last three decades. Previously, the research of gender and SLA basically focused on the topics valued in the area of SLA; nevertheless, with the change of perspectives it started to investigate the teachers and the learners more. In the previous period, only such studies that were based on positivist or postpositivist assumptions were respected by many scholars. As Davis and Skilton-Sylvester state real science meant only experimental or quasiexperimental design, surveys, and postpositivist qualitative studies to such scholars; and assuming only this hierarchy as the real track to follow neglects the wide range of contributions made through other paradigms (including gender) and excludes research participants' diverse experiences, "thereby creating conditions for inaccurate, inequitable and discriminatory outcomes" (2004: 388).

Ellis (1994) discusses the difference between the terms "sex" and "gender" and supports the two principles Labov suggested: "In stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms

than women and in the majority of linguistic changes, women use a higher frequency of the incoming forms than men (1991: 206-7).”

Then he turns Labov's generalizations into an hypothesis that follows as "women might be better at L2 learning than men as they are likely to be more open to new linguistic forms in the L2 input and they will be more likely to rid themselves of interlanguage forms that deviate from target-language norms" (Ellis, 1994: 202).

Two studies, Burstall's (1975) research in England on primary school students of French and Boyle's (1987) research in Hong Kong on university students of English, reveal that female students were more successful than 20 male students in the exams applied. However, Ellis does not reach conclusive results on these findings; he states that such generalizations might be misleading as Boyle's study also indicated higher achievement of male students in listening tests and the study by Bacon (1992) of university students of Spanish in the US found no such significant difference between boys and girls (1994: 204-5).

Apart from achievement, the attitudes towards language learning and motivation are two factors directly related to gender. According to Gardner and Lambert's study, female students of L2 French in Canada were more motivated than the male students and also had more positive attitudes towards the speakers of the target language (Block, 2002). Similarly, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) found that female university students of Spanish in the US were more instrumentally motivated than male students.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, sex marks the distinction between women and men as a result of their biological, physical and genetic differences. Gender roles are set by convention and other social, economic, political and cultural forces. From this perspective, sex is fixed and based in nature; gender is fluid and based in culture. This distinction constitutes progress compared with 'biology is destiny'. Furthermore, for many people the sex categories of female and male are neither fixed nor universal, but vary over time and across cultures. Accordingly, sex, like gender, is seen as a social and cultural construct. Bearing these in mind, it can be said that the reason behind this can be the gender roles between male and female students.

Men's and women's speech differs because boys and girls are brought up differently and men and women have different roles in society. The effect of biology on the behaviors and activities of both genders is undeniable. However; the effect of biology on the language acquisition of females in a different way has not been proved yet. Based on this, it can be said that language teachers should use, develop or apply different language teaching materials and techniques for students of different genders. In addition, different learning styles in language learning and strategies should be taken into consideration for different genders. As it has been stated, because there is no obvious evidence related to different language acquisition in both sexes, the efficacy of applying

different teaching methodologies for each sex remain as an unanswered question.

A child's sex is a visible, permanent attribute. Cross-cultural research indicates that gender roles are among the first that individuals learn and that all societies treat males differently from females. Therefore, gender-role or sex-role behavior is learned behavior. However, the range of roles occupied by males and females across cultures is broad. What is considered natural behavior for each gender is based more on cultural belief than on biological necessity. Nevertheless, the extent to which biological differences and gender socialization affect behavioral patterns and achievement is still a much-debated topic. The consensus of a large body of research is that no matter what the inherent biological differences, many of the observed differences between males and females can be clearly linked to differences in early socialization experiences (Feingold, 1992).

According to McConnell (1988), three points should be emphasized. Firstly, gender is not simply a matter of individual characteristics (e.g. sex) but also involves actions and social relations, ideology and politics. Secondly, patterns of language production depend more than just the agent's intrinsic characteristics, her sociolinguistics identity: they also reflect her assessment of social situations and her choice of strategies for the linguistic construction of her social relations. Thirdly, meaning interacts with gender because it links the social/psychological phenomenon of language with the abstract formal notion of a language, an interpreted linguistic system. In sum, a theory that accommodates the dual psychological and social nature of language and its relation to languages can help further understanding of gender and language.

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