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THE EFFECT OF GENDER STEREOTYPES AMONG LANGUAGE SPEAKERS IN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AKWANGA, NASARAWA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at revealing that it is problematic to only consider subordination and weakness when identifying women's language and to show that there are other elements playing a role in speech patterns. Forty fIve College of Education Akwanga students listened to each recording and evaluated the speaker in terms of ten personality traits. Results obtained showed a signifIcant difference in how male and female speakers were perceived, regardless of the language style they employed. Women's language and "standard" language were also perceived differently regardless of speaker gender. This paper tried to show whether genderspecifIC functions play a role in how a listener emerges. The authors found that when listening to a woman speak, people associate certain qualities with her based on gender stereotypes.

KEYWORDS: Stereotype, Language speakers, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Interest in stereotyping and prejudice has a sound basis due to its immense practical importance. Many studies expanded on Lakoff s argument that language embodies

gender inequity, As stated in Language and Woman's Place (LWP), there is a direct correlation between the inequity in language and the inequity in men and women's social statuses. “Women's language”, a term coined by Lakoff, became a commonly used identifier among language and gender researchers. According to Lakoff, women's language describes how women use language and how language is used to talk about women, both of which position women as powerless. This position has been adopted by a number of sociolinguists and feminists, in an effort to support Lakoff s rationale with empirical evidence (Lakoff s argument was based entirely on personal observation). The overall goal of such studies has often beenthe

classification of certain linguistic features as occurring more often in women or in men (Bem, 1974). Lippmann (2000) argued that our actions are not based on a direct knowledge of the “real” world because the “real environment is altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance”. Hence, in order to cope with this diversity, we construct these “pictures”, Lippmann stated that these pictures might be made by the person or given by their culture. He also argued that stereotypes are both rigid in their definition and resistant to change. As stereotypes arise from over generalization, they are by nature false. Yet, stereotypes arrange our understanding of the world and once established, they are difficult to eradicate. The influence of context (local and global), social factors other than gender (ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status), and issues ofpower have also been found to play a role in how men and women use language. This study addresses how men and women are evaluated (in terms of personality traits) by listeners. Taking into account the genderspecific functions that have been attached to language (as first posited by Lakoff), this paper asks the following questions: first, is there evidence that these genderspecific functions play a role in how a listener perceives a speaker? in other words, does a listener's evaluation of a speaker demonstrate an awareness of stereo typically gendered language characteristics, such as women's language? And second, if we elaborate on the first question posed, would a woman using women's language be subject to the same evaluation as a man using women's language?

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are several evidences from research and experiences which show that stereotypes are embedded and reproduced through most societies which have a serious effect on how people interact, the meanings that people place on different interactions, and how various interactions are perceived among genders in a society.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to test the effects of gender stereotypes among language speakers in Nasarawa State.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does a' listener's evaluation of a speaker demonstrate an awareness of stereo typically gendered language characteristics (such as women's language)?
2. To what extent would a woman using women's language be subject to the same evaluation as a man using women's language?

HYPOTHESIS

There is no significant difference between the effect of gender stereotypes among language speakers in Nasarawa State.

METHODOLOGY

Forty undergraduate student&of the College of Education, Akwanga participated in this study. Participants include five different linguistics classes (two sections of Introduction to Linguistics, two sections of Phonetics & Phonemics, and one section of Language, Gender & Society). The students were given a one-page handout explaining the purpose of the study and any benefits or risks resulting from their participation by an instructor. Although they were not aware of the focus on gender in the experiment to avoid any biases, the handout did explain that the purpose of the study was "to explore the relationship between how a person speaks and how that
person is perceived by others". The scheduled listening sessions were also provided so that interested students could choose when they want to participate (Hinton, 2000). The participants could listen to the recording as often as they wanted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question one:To what extent does a listener's evaluation of a speaker demonstrate an awareness of stereo typically gendered language characteristics (such as women's language)?

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Responses Scores by Speaker Gender and Language Style

Sex	Standard Language		Women's Language		Standard & Women's Language
	M	SD	M	SD	
Male (M)	3.26	0.45	2.8	0.42	3.26
Female (F)	3.16	0.42	2.34	0.45	2.76
M&F	3.22		2.51		

For each of the three dimensions, the evaluations indicate awareness on the part of the speakers of the gendered function of language. The fact that there is a difference in scores between women's language and standard language for the same speaker suggests that listeners consider the manner in which a petson speaks instead of only focusing on gender when they evaluate personality. It is quite possible that the participants were considering again, on a subconscious level what it means when a person-man or woman, speaks using certain linguistic forms like tag questions or hedges, for example. On the other hand, the results also show a strong effect for speaker gender on listeners' evaluations. Women were rated as less masculine, more feminine, and more nurturing than men, regardless of the linguistic style they use (Bem, 1993). These results confirm the first hypothesis presented in this paper regarding the effect of speaker gender. It was expected that speaker gender would have the most significant effeCt on how speakers are perceived, and, in fact, results appear to show that women were evaluated a certain way simply because they were women. The findings fall in line with Strands theory regarding the categorization "a set of beliefs that can accompany the negative feeling associated with prejudice".

Research Question two: To what extent would a woman using women's language be subject to the same evaluation as a man using women's language?

In a similar vein, Research Question #2 asks whether a man using women's language would be evaluated similarly to a woman using women's language. Neither the masculinity nor femininity scores demonstrate significant differences in how men using women's language and women using women's langUage are perceived. There is also a lack of significance in the differences between men using standard language and women using standard language.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations ofNurturance Scores by Speaker Gender and Language Style

Sex	Standard Language		Women's Language		Standard & Women's Language
	M	SD	M	SD	
Male (M)	2.22	0.45	2.8	0.44	3.26
Female (F)	2.18	0.45	2.84	0.45	3.36
M&F	**3.22**		**2.51**		

Interestingly, the difference is very small between men and women both using women's language. Men and women were rated similarly in terms of these nurturing traits when they both used women's language. A possible explanation for this interaction can be found in the factor analysis that extracted the nurturance dimension. As the results of the analysis show, the adjectives that make up this dimension as sensitive, warm, understanding did not fit into the masculinityfemininity framework created by the statistical analysis. It could be postulated that these adjectives have less of a gendered meaning for listeners, even though, according to Bem's Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), these adjectives are indicators of femininity. Perhaps women's language, instead of positioning a speaker as more feminine, or tentative and uncertain, positioned both maliand female speakers in such a way that listeners considered them to be similarly warm, understanding, and sensitive (nurturing). Again, this suggests that the features of women's language do, in fact, have many functions (Katz & Braly, 1933). Another possibility is that the nurturance dimension is actually mewuring another type of femininity. Similar to what the various factor analyses revealed, as discussed in Batstone, Susan, Tuomi, and Seppo (1981), it may make more sense to regard the concept of femininity as multi-dimensional. For example, it could be more useful to .consider the adjecTives used in the femininity dimension – chIldlike, shy, and feminine– as the more sociaily undesirable manifestations of femininity.

On the other hand, the "nurturing" adjectives – udderstanding, warm, and sensitivecould be viewed as more desirable qualities of femininity and, as a result, they are more acceptable for a man to possess. This would explain the similarity in scores in the nurturance dimension between women using women's language and men using women's language. This style of language in general may make the speaker sound warmer, more understanding, and more sensitive, and listeners may have been more inclined to rate a man similarly to a woman in terms ofthese adjectives.

EFFECT OFPARTICIPANTS' GENDER

The effect of the participants' gender was also examined to see if men and women rated speakers differently. The research was conducted to determine if the gender of the participant had an impact on the perception of speakers. In general, there were no significant differences between men's and women's evaluations of the four conditions (men using standard language, men using women's language, women using standard language, women using women's language) in terms of the three dimensions. These results bear out the hypothesis that men and women would perceive speakers with no significant difference. However, all of the results are not as straightforward. Within the masculinity dimension, two groups had significant results: men using women's language as perceived by women when anal-,,_.,: with

equal variances assumed, and women speaking standard language as perceived by men when analyzed with equal variances not assumed.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study have significant implications for language and gender research. The inclusion of listener attitudes provides information that most of the past researches have not emphasized, namely, how gender and language interact to create an attitude toward a speaker. This suggests that the construction of a social identity is actually a cooperative process, incorporating the language style a speaker chooses and whatever meaning these choices have for the speaker as wellas the listener's interpretation of that language style in addition to other non-linguistic factors

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on informal discussions with participants, it was revealed that the wording of the ratings for the questionnaire may have been problematic.

Instead of determining how often the speaker demonstrates the various personality traits-never, rarely, sometimes, etc, it would have made more sense to-ask listeners to rate how well the adjectives describe the person for example, never true or almost never true. This wording does not require the listener to think about how the speaker behaves generally.

The listener can consider how they would describe a person at that particular moment while they are hearing the speaker talk. It is therefore recommended that other researches in this regards should rephase the questions posed to the participants.

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