

A Comprehensive Study on Gender Language and Its Differences in China

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Abstract: The study of language and gender, especially the study of gender language differences involves many fields such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, news media, education, and so on. Starting from the broad definition of gender language, this paper composes and reviews the research history of domestic gender language and its differences. Around the research history of domestic gender language, the research period is divided according to the timeline into germination, genesis, and growth. Divided by theme and content, the main content is the phenomenon of sexism in language; the second is the study of gender language style differences; the third is the root causes of sexism and verbal gender differences, i.e., the construction of the corresponding theories; and the fourth is the discussion of the limitations of the study of gender language in foreign countries.

Keywords: Language and gender; Gender language differences; Language differences

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1. Introduction

Gender language (male/female language or men's and women's language) is broadly defined as the gender-specific language used by men and women and the linguistic phenomena used to differentiate between men and women in a given speech.

According to Jespersen, related studies date back to 1664 when reports of the descriptive nature of gendered language began to appear, and it was at the beginning of the twentieth century that the issue of language and gender attracted the attention of scholars. The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen was the main representative of this period. In his book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* in 1922, Jespersen devoted an entire chapter to the characterization of female language. In the 1960s, sociolinguistics was first formed in the United States as a fringe discipline between linguistics and sociology. At this time, the mainstream discussion focused on the characteristics of female language. In the 1970s, some famous linguists such as R. Lakoff (1975), Labov (1972; 1975), Trudgill (1974), Zimmerman & West (1975), and Thorne & Henley (1975)^[1] took the study of gender language one step further, moving from the characterization of female language to sexism and gender differences in speech, but also exploring its social roots. From the 80s to the

90s, most linguists carried out in-depth discussions and research on the differences between men's and women's speech on the basis of the 80s, and most of the research focused on the forms of men's and women's language. In April 1999, the 44th International Linguistic Association held at New York University in the U.S.A. took "Gender & Language" as the central theme of the conference for comprehensive discussion.

2. Overview of domestic research on gender language

The research on gender language in China has gone through three periods, the first period was 1980–1990, the second period was 1990–2000, and the growth period from 2000–2010. According to the statistics of the Index of Foreign Language Research Papers published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, from 1979 to 1999, nearly one hundred relevant papers were published in academic journals in the direction of foreign language teaching and research in China.

From 1980–1990, gender linguistics research mainly focused on translating the existing research results of foreign countries, such as "Sociolinguistics" began to pay attention to the relationship between gender and language. During this period, gender linguistics as an emerging discipline gradually entered the field of vision of researchers, but there were no research monographs and a limited number of papers during this period.

According to the search results of the CNKI database, from 1981, the first study of "language and gender" (Peter Trudgill's character), to 2022, there were 1,396 papers published in domestic academic journals, mainly in 30 fields such as foreign language and literature, Chinese language and literature, world literature, journalism and media, sociology and statistics, and education. Research on gender language difference, female language, gender discrimination, and communication theory are the most popular research topics.

From 1990–2000, researchers inherited the research pattern of the previous stage, starting from both phonological and grammatical perspectives, and the object of research was no longer limited to Chinese but began to pay attention to gender differences in other languages. In addition, researchers began to pay attention to the unique phenomenon of gender differences in Chinese, and the phenomenon of gender differences embodied in Chinese characters. Researchers absorbed the essence of foreign studies and began to pay attention to the phenomenon of gender discrimination in the process of discourse communication. During this period, the research on gender linguistics began to expand in breadth and depth, and a monograph on gender differences in language, *Gender and Language*, summarizing the research results, appeared.

From 2000–2010, the number of papers, translations, and annotations increased significantly, and the research was localized and diversified. In the above three periods, according to the linear development of time, *Language and Social Life: Notes on Sociolinguistics* was the first monograph on sociolinguistics in China. In the chapter on "Language and Society," a study was devoted to gender language and culture, and gender language was described. Subsequent works have paid enough attention to the study of gender language differences, while the number of papers studying gender language differences has gradually increased.

Taking an overview of domestic and foreign gender language research, gender language research mainly involves four aspects: (1) the phenomenon of sexism in language; (2) the study of gender language (style) differences; (3) the root causes of sexism and verbal gender differences, i.e., the construction of the corresponding theories; and (4) the exploration of the limitations of foreign gender language research. It can be seen that domestic gender language ranges from the definition of the concept to the exploration of foreign studies, to the study of the relationship between gender, language, and culture in Chinese, while constantly focusing on foreign gender language studies and exploring the limitations of foreign studies.

2.1. Research on sexism in language

Research on the phenomenon of sexism in language mainly involves English, Japanese, and Chinese, while sexism in English has been more fully studied. There are three characteristics of the initial period of research on gender language in Chinese linguistics: firstly, relevant monographs began to raise the issue of gender language, such as *Outline of Linguistics* (1983), *Sociolinguistics* (1983), and *Language and Social Life, An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (1985), and *Research on the Culture and Pragmatics of Gender Language* (2000). The second is the emergence of general introductory articles, such as *Language and Gender* (1981) and other research overviews^[1-3], as well as overviews of linguistic gender differences^[4-6]. The third is the study of sexism and gender differences in the Chinese language^[7,8].

The manifestations of sexism in language include discrimination against both men and women, but mainly against women. Sexism in language is manifested in the following aspects: firstly, language is regulated by men, with men's language as the standard and the main body, while women's language is only an accessory or a variant; secondly, some of the female nouns tend to "depreciate"; thirdly, there are more feminine than masculine words related to sexuality; fourthly, the order of words is that men come first and women come second, for example Mr. and Mrs. etc.; fifthly, words related to women are often used in a pejorative or even insulting way^[9].

The above five manifestations of discrimination are mostly studied at the level of gender culture, which refers to the system of beliefs, values, and behaviors that society prescribes for different genders, and the scope of what people of different genders think, do, say, and feel. For example, the first, fourth, and fifth items in the manifestations of discrimination are particularly relevant to the conclusions of studies on gender culture.

The above studies, mostly from the three dimensions of semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, have studied the discriminatory manifestations of gender language, starting from language construction and lexical meaning. In the end, such discrimination is attributed to the biological differences of gender, the social division of labor, social status, psychology, the socialization process, and cultural concepts, etc. the root causes of gender discrimination and gender differences in speech are explained from historical, social, and physiological factors.

2.2. Gender speech style differences

Many scholars have studied in the field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics through the standardization of male and female gender speech, vocabulary choice, sentence structure, topics, amount of conversation, least reflection, silence, etc. from the situation of daily interaction discourse.

The vocabulary and pragmatics perspective contains differences in vocabulary choice; differences in speech acts such as compliments, apologies, invitations, greetings, and requests; differences in the use of sentence patterns such as interrogative and imperative sentences, and differences in the frequency of their use; and differences in the six dimensions of conversational role reversal, topic control, curse words and taboo words, interrogative words, and polite language on the gender's verbal communicative competence.

The perspectives of conversational styles contain interruptions; topics; amount of discourse; least response and silence difference studies. Among the above research perspectives, quantitative research has been used for the number of words, the frequency of sentence patterns, and silence, while qualitative research has been used for topics, role reversal, and interruptions.

The research related to gender speech style differences, when studied from the dimensions of pragmatic and communicative linguistics, has gradually expanded from the initial single study of male-female conversational communication toward the study of speech style differences in male-to-male and female-to-female same-sex communicative conversations.

2.3. Root cause of sexism and speech gender differences

At present, this part of the research mainly includes invasion theory, taboo theory, prestige theory, dominance theory, difference theory, and so on. Among them, the invasion theory is not universal; the taboo theory refers to the restriction of women's use of specific words at specific times and occasions; and the prestige theory is Trudgill's view that men pursue a potential prestige and women pursue a public prestige.

The more widely accepted theoretical construct is the dominance theory, in which men are more socially advantaged, and the concept of "rights" is used to explain gender differences in speech as a reflection of social reality. The theory of difference, on the other hand, reflects a growing political awareness that women are more active, supportive, and cooperative than men, and the so-called bicultural model of cross-gender communication is the most recent of the theories currently being constructed.

3. New trends in domestic gender language research

Domestic gender language has been analyzed mostly from the perspectives of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and psychology in the past two decades ^[7], enriching the research methodology of gender language differences on the basis of previous language studies.

Wu ^[10], in response to the tendency of traditional sociolinguistic theories to overgeneralize when analyzing gender variants, proposed to study the formation of gender variants by taking behavioral groups as the unit of linguistic analysis.

Wu and Yu ^[11] pointed out the drawbacks of focusing solely on differences and emphasized that when studying the topic of gender language differences, it is important to focus not only on the differences between males and females in terms of language but also on the commonalities that males and females exhibit in terms of language.

In addition, Xiao and Xiao ^[12] used cognitive linguistics theory to explore the law of gender speech resemblance, aiming to reveal the social roots of gender-marked speech. Shi's ^[5] study focused on the micro-situational factors of gender interaction.

Teaching is also an important new dimension of gender-language research, with gender factors being incorporated into schooling and classroom teaching, and the impact of teaching materials and teacher and student gender on teaching being discussed. Examining and criticizing the phenomenon of gender differentiation in education from the basic standpoint and viewpoint of gender, and breaking down gender prejudice in the field of education was carried out ^[13].

Other corpus-based studies have shown that the survey instruments and corpus sources for studying linguistic gender and its differences are being improved and enriched ^[14]. A growing number of studies are based on translated works, combing through the corpus of gendered language and vocabulary in the text to make inquiries regarding feminism and women's consciousness ^[15]. From the learning concepts and strategies of different genders, as well as physiological differences, new studies are added on the development of speech centers of different genders, language listening skills, verbal visual ability, learning attitudes, personality traits, and language characteristics.

4. Conclusion

At present, domestic research monographs on gender language differences are insufficient compared to those from foreign countries, but they do cover all areas of gender language differences. With the continuous development of science and technology, the domestic research on language and gender shows a diversified

trend, such as the cross research with corpus. As for the research on gender language discrimination, it is still mostly based on the textual analysis of literary works, and the text is interpreted with the help of gender language research. There is also a need to enrich theories and methods.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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