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ABSTRACT

Sex differences in language use have been examined for many years, but no clear-cut conclusions exist. A meta-analysis of the existing literature was conducted regarding powerful/powerless language use, including 30 studies, with a total combined sample size of 3,012. The overall correlation indicated that men use more powerful language than women. Type of language feature and gender were found to be moderator variables. Findings suggest that: (1) since men are using more powerful language than women, men are also being perceived as more credible than women; and (2) powerful language is a skill that can be taught. Almost all of the participants in this review were university students--generally the classic 18-22-year-old group. It is possible that in other environments the effects would be more significant; in more "real-world" investigations, men would speak even more powerfully and women would speak even more "powerless-ly." Future research should focus on type of language feature, message elicitation, the dynamics of interaction, and naturally occurring language. Contains 1 table of data and 53 references. (Author/RS)

Sex Differences in Powerful/Powerless Language Use: A Meta-Analytic Review

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ABSTRACT

Sex Differences in Powerful/Powerless Language Use:

A Meta-Analytic Review

Sex differences in language use have been examined for many years, but no clear-cut conclusions exist. A meta-analysis of the existing literature was conducted regarding powerful/powerless language use, including 30 studies, with a total combined sample size of 3,012. The overall correlation (r= +.105) indicates that men use more powerful language than women. Type of language feature and gender were found to be moderator variables. Implications are discussed.

Sex Differences in Powerful/Powerless Language Use: A Meta-Analytic Review

Robin Lakoff's two papers, Language and Woman's Place (1975a, 1975b) generated substantial literature about men's and women's use of powerful and/or powerless language. Lakoff claims that "women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them" (1975a, p. 46). Lakoff believes that there are specific features that characterize women's speech and that the effect of this language style is that it keeps women in submissive positions and men in dominant roles. O'Barr also addresses this concern, although in the reverse: "[t]he tendency for more women to speak powerless language and for men to speak it less is due, at least in part, to the greater tendency of women to occupy relatively powerless social positions" (1982, pp. 70-71).

Lakoff (1975a) explains several differences between men's and women's speech, including: (1) *vocabulary items* (i.e., women have a greater repertoire of colors and use less harsh swear words), (2) *empty adjectives* (i.e., women

use more words like "adorable", "charming," and "divine"), (3) *question forms* (i.e., women use tag questions and imperatives in question form, whereas men use declaratives), (4) *polite forms* (i.e., women say "please" and "thank you" more often than men), (5) *hedges* and/or *forms of uncertainty* (i.e., women use many phrases like "I guess," "kinda," and "I think"), (6) *intensives* (i.e., women use "really," "so," and "very" more frequently than men), and (7) *hypercorrect grammar* (i.e., women are less likely than men to use words like "ain't" or to shorten words like "doin'" or "runnin'"). These examples constitute some of the most common features that have been included in the concept of "powerless" language, and examined over the past twenty years.

REVIEW OF PAST RESEARCH

Lakoff's work employs qualitative methodology, relying mostly on introspection. Subsequently, a number of quantitative studies have been performed to test Lakoff's claims. Results regarding different speech acts will be considered in the paragraphs following.

Interruptions

Interruptions remain the single most researched feature of powerful/powerless language, with the general assumption

that those who interrupt hold more power in a conversation. However, even with the substantial amount of literature on interruptions, the results remain inconclusive. Zimmerman & West's 1975 study provides an often-cited investigation of interruption behavior. They found that in eleven mixed-sex pairs, men performed 98% of all interruptions. West & Zimmerman (1983) performed a similar investigation, and found that in five mixed-sex dyads, men performed 75% of all interruptions. These percentages represent extreme findings, but they have been replicated by other researchers (Dindia, 1987; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Carli, 1990). Turner, Dindia, & Pearson (1995) found that men interrupt more than women in both same- and mixed-sex dyads, while Bilous & Krauss (1988) found that in mixed-sex pairs, men did more interrupting, but that it was the *female* same-gender pairs that interrupted more than the male same-gender pairs, and to quite a large degree.

However, there is also empirical support showing *no* sex differences in interruption behavior. Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz (1985) state that "[i]nterruptions are clearly a sign of conversational dominance" (p. 40), but found no difference in the amount of interruptions between males and

females in cross-sex couples. Simkins-Bullock (1991) found no differences in the amount of interruptions within mixed-sex dyads, or between male-male pairs and female-female pairs, supporting Kollock, et.al.'s findings. Interestingly, there is also support for the claim that women actually interrupt more than men. Kennedy & Camden (1981) observed 35 graduate students over six one-hour, mixed-sex group sessions. They found that women performed 157 of the 255 interruptions. Dindia (1987) found women interrupting more than men in her study of thirty mixed-sex pairs. Clearly, results from these investigations are inconsistent and inconclusive.

Disclaimers and Hedges

Disclaimers and hedges, both considered powerless language, have also been subject to much empirical scrutiny, along with some controversy. Carli (1990) found that women use a substantially larger amount of disclaimers than men (up to three-and-a-half times more) in both same- and mixed-sex pairs. These results have been replicated by other researchers (Stutman, 1987; Entwisle & Garvey, 1972). Turner, Dindia, & Pearson (1995), however, found just the

opposite--that men use more disclaimers than women in both same- and mixed-sex pairs.

Within the literature on hedges, a great deal of controversial evidence exists. Carli (1990) found that, similar to disclaiming behavior, women perform more hedges than men, both in same-sex dyads and mixed-sex dyads. Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson (1988) found results that supported Carli's first finding, but not the second, as they report men using more hedges in same-sex pairs than women. In an investigation of sex differences in children's language (comparing twenty children in each age group of 4 years, 8 years, 12 years, and 16 years), Staley (1982) found that in all age groups, males use more hedges than females. The only exception was the 12 year-old age group, which had just as strong an effect, but in the opposite direction, with females using more. An interesting side note is that the difference is largest at age 16, which may indicate a learned behavior as time goes on. However, it is in the "unexpected" direction, so without further research, conclusions cannot be drawn. Crosby & Nyquist (1977) coded for the use of "female register" (including empty adjectives, tag questions, hedges, and the word "so") in

three separate studies, and found that women rated higher in the use of female register than men.

Tag Questions

Tag questions, as mentioned above, have been investigated in a number of studies as well. Besides Crosby & Nyquist, Carli (1990) also found that women use more tag questions than men, in both same-sex pairs and mixed-sex pairs. McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale (1977) reported the same findings, with a slightly larger effect. The same researchers also report that "imperative constructions in question form,...defined as alternatives to simple and direct ways of ordering action" (p. 548), are used more by women than by men.

Additional Variables

Other variables have also been examined as powerful or powerless. Hostile verbs (Gilley & Summers, 1970)were used more by men than women, and men were also found to do more swearing than women on a daily basis in "everyday situations" (Staley, 1978). In addition, men have been found to make threats more than women(Scudder & Andrews, 1995). Civilities (saying "please," "thank you," "gladly," "might I be able to have," etc.) have been coded as

powerless language, and have been found to crop up more in women's speech than in men's (Brouwer, Gerritsen, & DeHaan, 1979). Women have also been accused of a "fondness for hyperbole and...use of adverbs of intensity" (Haas, 1979, p. 620), which is seen as powerless language, and empirical evidence has supported that tendency (Carli, 1990; Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; and Turner, Dindia, & Pearson, 1995).

As Deaux & Major (1987) have said, "in short, researchers attempting to document and replicate sex differences have often found them elusive, a case of 'now you see them, now you don't,'" (p. 369). However, the need for clear-cut results is also evident. In a recent meta-analysis of powerful and powerless language, Burrell & Koper (1994) found that "powerful language is perceived as more credible than powerless language" (p. 248), which indicates that women may be in the position of being perceived as less credible. Because of the contradictory results, the researchers wished to determine whether or not women speak less powerfully than men.

META-ANALYSIS AS LITERATURE SUMMARY

Two types of reviews are generally used to synthesize existing research: narrative and meta-analytic. While both methods analyze the relevant theoretical and methodological issues to determine the "good" studies, typically, narrative reviews are qualitative whereas meta-analytic reviews are quantitative. The most important difference between the two methods is that narrative reviews count up insignificant versus significant effects from individual studies, while meta-analytic reviews use quantitative summaries on which to base their claims. When doing a meta-analysis, the researcher: (a) computes the effect size associated with significant tests, (b) determines the consistency of various effects, and (c) searches for potential features that could moderate specific outcomes (Hunter, Schmidt, & Jackson, 1982).

Meta-analysis provides a more appropriate review than narrative in this case because it is more systematic, not only in its methods of literature search, but in the calculation and interpretation of results from the studies obtained by said literature search. This method not only limits errors but encourages replication.

METHOD

Sample

A thorough search of the research literature examining the sex differences in the use of powerful/powerless language was conducted. The relevant literature was obtained through a search of journals in communication, social psychology, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology, as well as examination of social science indexes, including PsychLit (from inception through March 1996) and ERIC (1966 through March 1996). The key words that were used for the search were: "powerful language," "powerl ss language," "gender and language," "women and language," "men and language," and various combinations of the above. The unavailability of unpublished dissertations, theses, and convention papers restricted the literature search to published articles and book chapters.

Three criteria were developed to determine whether a study would be included in the final analysis: (a) the study had to code for powerful/powerless language, (b) the study had to compare males' use with females' use of powerful/powerless language, and (c) the language sample had to be from actual language generated by the subject, which

was then coded for powerful/powerless language features (as opposed to a manipulated reading which was then rated by the subject for sex role stereotypes, for example). Basic information for each study is provided in Table 1.

A great deal of studies were originally uncovered in the search, but not all were usable. Sixteen were judged unusable due to manipulation of the dependent variable (Bell, Zahn, & Hopper, 1984; Bradac, Konsky, & Davies, 1976; Bradac, Konsky, & Elliott, 1976; Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Bradley, 1981; Carli, 1989; Hall & Braunwald, 1981; Hosman & Wright, 1987; Johnson & Vinson, 1990; Mulac, 1976; Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986; Newcombe & Arnkoff, 1979; Siegler & Siegler, 1976; Warfel, 1984; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985; and Wright & Hosman, 1983), and 3 were not included due to data being not recoverable (Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Moore, Shaffer, Goodsell, & Baringoldz, 1983; and Natale, Entin, & Jaffe, 1979). Thirty studies were included in the final analysis, with a combined sample total of 3,012 subjects.

Coding Studies

In order to make the analyses a bit more "streamlined," the original twenty-five language features were later collapsed into four categories: Floor Allocation,

Certainty/Uncertainty, Politeness/Impoliteness, and Other/Mixture. By combining these different speech acts into groupings of behaviors with conceptual similarities, we hoped to uncover more conclusive, concrete results.

The first category, Floor Allocation, includes interruptions, turn-taking, starting a sequence, independent turns, and simultaneous speech. These language features were grouped together because they are all measures of taking/maintaining the floor in conversation. Categories were considered powerful language when used to either take the floor from another speaker or maintain their current speaking turn.

The second category, Certainty/Uncertainty, includes the largest amount of language features (variables marked with a (+) are considered powerful when employed, while those marked with a (-) are considered powerless): qualifiers and/or disclaimers(-), hedges(-), tag questions(-), modal constructions(-), imperatives as questions(-), fillers(-), adverbials beginning a sentence(-), fillers beginning a sentence(-), negations(+), and justifiers(+). All of the language features in this

category indicate a particular level of (un)certainty with what the speaker is saying.

Politeness/Impoliteness is the third category, and it includes intensifiers(-), verbal reinforcers(-), civilities(-), hostile verbs(+), threats(+), obscenities(+), and directives(+). These variables were grouped together because they all show a direct display of (im)politeness.

The fourth category ("Other/Mixture") was reserved for those variables that didn't seem to fit elsewhere, and for studies which grouped many variables from different categories into one "variable" (i.e., "female register," which included tag questions, empty adjectives, hedges, and the word "so"). Studies with variables that were not separable were also included in the fourth category. Included here are elaborated vs. restricted codes, female register(-), and dynamism(+).

Meta-Analysis Procedures

The procedure employed in this investigation involved converting available summary statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations, correlations, t-statistics, F-statistics) into correlational estimates for summarizing purposes. A positive correlation (a randomly assigned

designation) indicates that men used more powerful language and/or women used more powerless language; a negative correlation indicates the reverse. The correlations were weighted for sample size and averaged.

A chi-square test for homogeneity was then performed on the summary data. If the chi-square test was nonsignificant, the average correlation was considered to be an accurate true score estimate. If, however, the chi square test was significant, alternative methods of determining the average correlation were performed.

RESULTS

To assess the difference between males' and females' use of powerful/powerless language, an overall analysis of the summary correlation was estimated. The average effect was $r= +.105$ ($k=30$; $N=3,012$), indicating that males used more powerful language than women. However, results of the formal homogeneity test ($X^2_{(29)}=61.30$, $p>.05$) showed that there was a significant amount of variance and that there is at least one moderator variable.

In an effort to identify the moderator(s), each of the four categories were considered separately. Floor Allocation was included in fourteen studies, employing a

total of 604 participants. The effect was r= +.067 ($X^2_{(13)}$=27.82, p>.05), with a significant amount of variance. The Zimmerman & West (1975) and West & Zimmerman (1983) studies had the largest correlations, and so were removed for the next set of analyses. When running the same statistics on Floor Allocation without these two studies, the effect was r= +.025 (k=12, N=572), and the variance was found to be trivial ($X^2_{(11)}$=8.58, p<.05). This indicates that men take the floor and/or maintain the floor more than women (and hence are using more powerful language).

Certainty/Uncertainty was included in ten studies, with a total sample size of 1,137. The effect was r= +.087 ($X^2_{(9)}$=27.66, p>.05), indicating a significant amount of variance. The McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale (1977) study was an outlier here, and without this study, there were nine cases with a total N=1,039. The effect was r= +.054 ($X^2_{(8)}$=14.68, p<.05), indicating that men use more powerful (or "certain") language than women.

Politeness/Impoliteness was also included in ten studies, employing a total of 1,191 participants. The effect was r= +.162 ($X^2_{(9)}$=17.10, p>.05), indicating a significant amount of variance. Once again, McMillan, et

al. (1977) was an outlier, and without it, there were nine cases with N=1,093. The effect was r= +.134 ($X^2_{(8)}$=6.92, p<.05), which indicates that women speak more politely than men--or, in other words, less powerfully.

The Other/Mixture category included fourteen studies and 958 participants. The effect was r= +.174 ($X^2_{(13)}$=17.67, p<.05), indicating that men speak more powerfully than women.

Gender was also considered as a possible moderator variable, and the same-sex pairs were analyzed apart from the mixed-sex pairs. Seven studies (N=426) investigated same-sex pairs, and the effect was r= +.002 ($X^2_{(6)}$=40.64, p>.05), indicating a significant amount of variance. The Bilous & Krauss (1988) article was responsible for a large amount of variance, and was removed for the next analysis. The effect size without it (N=366) was r= +.126 ($X^2_{(5)}$=2.56, p<.05), which indicates that in same-sex pairs, men speak more powerfully than women.

There were fifteen studies that incorporated mixed-sex pairs, using a total of 1,754 participants. The effect was r= +.110 ($X^2_{(14)}$=18.94, p<.05), indicating that men speak more powerfully than women in mixed-sex pairs.

DISCUSSION

The existing literature regarding the use of powerful/powerless language by men and women has produced conflicting results. In the current investigation, results from 30 studies examining men's and women's use of powerful/powerless language were subjected to meta-analysis. Results supported Lakoff's claim (1975a, 1975b) that men do use more powerful language than women, but it also indicated that there are a few important moderator variables to consider, such as type of language feature and sex composition of the dyad (or group).

Limitations

An issue that may require more careful consideration is message elicitation. Most of the studies included in the present analysis were interaction situations, but a few (Beck, 1978; Entwisle & Garvey, 1972; Gilley & Summers, 1970; Mulac & Lundell, 1980; Mulac & Lundell, 1982; Mulac, Incontro, & James, 1985; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Staley, 1978; and Staley, 1982) placed a subject in a situation and required the subject to react (rather than *interact*), and the language was then coded.

This difference in message elicitation may have some moderating effects.

Almost all of the participants in this review were university students--generally the classic 18-22-year-old group. The exceptions are few (Brouwer, Gerritsen, & DeHaan, 1979; Crosby & Nyquist, 1977, Exp. II & III; Entwisle & Garvey, 1972; Staley, 1982; and Stutman, 1987). It is quite possible that in other environments the effects would even be more significant, seeing as at the university level we at least profess to be aware of gender discrimination and try to be "fair," considering the amount of bias that actually exists. It could be argued that in more "real-world" investigations (i.e., naturalistic observation), men would speak even more powerfully and women would speak even more "power*less*-ly."

The sample included in this review is also not very international/intercultural. Only two of the studies included in the current analysis were performed outside of the United States on non-English-speaking subjects (Brouwer, Gerritsen, & DeHaan, 1979; and Pillon, Degauquier, & Duquesne, 1992), so we have no idea if these results would hold true in other countries, with other languages. Romance

languages (i.e., Spanish, French, Italian) which give all objects an actual gender for the purpose of language may, for example, have very interesting effects. In a related vein, power is a very different construct in some other countries (i.e., Asian politeness norms), which could have an effect on the correlations.

Implications

Burrell & Koper's (1994) meta-analysis on powerful/powerless language and credibility found that "powerful language is perceived as more credible than powerless language" (p. 248). This finding indicates that the current meta-analysis has substantial implications. Since men are using more powerful language than women, men are also being perceived as more credible than women. This affirms Lakoff's fear that language is serving to keep women in submissive positions (1975a, 1975b). Kramer (1974) echoes this concern: "...all aspects of female speech, if they do indeed exist...would indicate one way in which the sex roles are maintained" (pp. 20-21).

However, another important implication is that powerful language is most definitely a skill that can be taught. If we now have clear-cut evidence that men speak more

powerfully than women, and we have definitions of what types of language is considered more powerful (and hence more credible), we can use this knowledge to our benefit and actually teach women to communicate more powerfully.

Future Research

It is necessary to flush out more moderator variables, in order to further study in this area of communication. Type of language feature should be looked at in closer detail, if possible. Also important is the issue of message elicitation, as the dynamics of interaction may influence the presence of powerful/powerless language. A third consideration is doing more naturalistic observation, as the effects may become more significant outside of the university boundaries. Naturally-occurring language is an important feature to this area of study, but getting a representative sample of all populations (not just those involved in academia) could make a difference.

Table 1

Description of Overall Analysis

Author[1]	Year	N	Overall Correlation
Beattie	1981	55	-.105
Beck	1978	24	+.482
Bilous	1988	60	-.260
Brouwer	1979	587	+.080
Carli	1990	116	+.261
Crosby Exp. I	1977	64	+.242
Exp. II	1977	197	+.072
Exp. III	1977	90	+.152
Dindia	1987	60	-.100
Entwisle	1972	665	+.077
Gilley	1970	100	+.268
Kennedy	1981	35	-.200
Kollock	1985	30	-.089
Martin	1983	40	+.074
McMillan	1977	98	+.449
Mulac	1980	63	+.277
Mulac	1982	48	+.110

Author	Year	N	Overall Correlation
Mulac	1985	12	+.307
Mulac Exp. I	1988	48	+.038
Mulac Exp. II	1988	48	+.055
Pillon	1992	40	+.315
Scudder	1995	142	+.178
Simkins-Bullock	1991	78	+.048
Staley	1978	26	+.107
Staley	1982	55	+.132
Stutman	1987	50	+.100
Turner	1995	80	+.085
West	1983	10	+.700
Willis	1976	15	-.040
Zimmerman	1975	22	+.716

[1]Only the first author is listed; see references for complete citation

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