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An investigation on linguistic gender differences in the classroom

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It has been claimed that in gender differences of language women's language is different from men's language. Men and women learn different behavior as part of their social differentiation; thus the important point is how this interacts with social identity. The purpose of this study is to determine whether there are linguistic differences between female and male university teachers in face to face interactions during their teaching in class. The teacher-student interactions comprise the data of the study. The results are evaluated according to the 6 universals regarding language and gender formulated by Holmes in 1993.

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1. Introduction

It has been claimed that in gender differences of language, women's language is different from men's language in that men's language is perceived as unmarked, and women's is marked, because women as a social group have their own distinct linguistic domain. However, gender differentiation is not a fixed and pre-existing fact (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 485, c. in Bergvall 1999: 280). Men and women learn different behavior as part of their social differentiation (Maltz & Borker 1982; Coates 1993; Tannen 1990; Thorne 1993). Thus, the important point is how this behavior interacts with social identity. Studies of gender differences, therefore, must pay attention to social settings where a multidimensional grid (Tannen 1996: 202) is present, and this grid illustrates hierarchy / equality on one axis and closeness / distance on another. Therefore, as Tannen (1996) puts it, in order to understand language and gender the concept of framing, which is a way of simultaneously balancing the dimensions of status and connection, is particularly important.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether there are linguistic differences between female and male university teachers in face to face interaction during their teaching in class. As a result of the inequality in class that exists within the hierarchy of a classroom, asymmetric discourse between the teacher and the students is the focus of framing of the survey.

3. Methodology

Two female and two male university teachers, working at Anadolu University, Department of Education participated in the investigation. They were between the ages of 24-40 and had at least 3 years of teaching experience.

The teacher-student interactions comprising the data of the study were recorded during the first 45-50 minutes of teaching. It was the first term, when the teachers were becoming acquainted with the class. The teachers were equipped with color-microphones. The interactions were transcribed and 129 utterances were grouped according to the frequency of the usage of tag questions, back channels, questions, rhetorical questions and addressing of students as 'friends-guys'. Then the results were evaluated according to the 6 universals regarding language and gender formulated by Holmes in 1993 (c. in Bergvall 1999: 281):

- (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.

4. Results

4.1.

The frequency of tag questions used by female teachers is 15, whereas by male teachers, it is 8. In equal amounts of female and male utterances, women use more tags than men, which suggests that women are facilitators, that is they feel responsible for ensuring the interaction proceed smoothly.

- (a) – *Ödevlerinizi getirdiniz **di mi**?*
 ‘You’ve brought your homework, haven’t you?’
 (b) – *Kuram ve yapılar bilgisini hatırladınız **de mi**?*
 ‘You remembered the theory and the structure, didn’t you?’

In this respect female teachers’ tags *di mi* and *de mi* are short forms of the same word *değil mi* and are used in an informal style. They have affective function because they express the teachers’ attitude towards the students. These tags are addressee-oriented as they support / invite students to participate; and Coates (1993: 122) terms them as “facilitative tags”.

On the other hand, tags used by male teachers express modal meaning: they signal the teacher’s degree of certainty about the proposition expressed:

- (c) – *Deprem korkusu **değil mi**?*
 ‘Fear of earthquake, isn’t it?’
 (d) – *Neticede çok fazla kişiyle etkileşiyorum, **doğru mu**?*
 ‘As a result, I interact with too many people, right?’

Such tags are described as “speaker-oriented”, (Coates 1993: 120) since the teacher asks the students to confirm his proposition by using the standard forms of tag *değil mi*.

4.2.

The frequency of back channelling in female teachers is 54, and in male teachers it is 0. Female teachers’ frequent use of back channelling forms reveals women’s tendency to focus on the affective functions of interaction. In Turkish, back channels can be in the form of *hı-hı*, *ha-ha*, which are used to encourage speakers to continue talking. They indicate that the listener is paying attention and is interested in hearing more (Holmes 1993: 56). In most of the studies there is evidence that women use more back channels than men (Hirschman 1974; Leet-Pellegrini 1980; Preisler 1986; Munro 1987; Roger 1989). Also in this survey, female teachers encourage students to continue their talk by explaining something or participating:

- (e) Student – *Mesela açı, açılarla ilgili olabilir.*
 ‘... For example angle, can be related to angles...’
 Female teacher – *Hı, hı açının tanımını verebilmesi...*
 ‘Hı-hı definition of an angle...’
 (f) Student – *... Öğretmenin sınıftaki öğrencilere eşit davranması gerekli.*
 ‘... It is necessary for the teacher to behave equally to

students in class.'

Female teacher – *Ha- ha evet.*
 'Ha- ha- yes.'

On the other hand, male teachers preferred only to listen to the students silently.

4.3.

The frequency of questions asked by female teachers is 30, and 80 by male teachers. Questions are part of the conversational sequencing device Question + Answer. Questions and answers are linked together in conversation: questions demand a response from the addressee. Research findings suggest that women use interrogative forms more than men. However, in asymmetrical discourse, such as teacher-pupil interaction (Barnes & Rosen 1971; Stubbs 1983) it has been shown that questions are used overwhelmingly more by the powerful participants, that is the teachers, in order to elicit responses from students. In this survey male teachers use questions more often than female teachers by giving more importance to the relevant variable occupational status, as confirmed by Barnes (1971) and Stubbs (1983). This indicates that male teachers' power and status consciousness is more than female teachers'.

4.4.

The frequency of rhetoric questions, used by female teachers is 19 and by male teachers is 50. In asymmetric discourse as in classroom interaction, rhetoric questions are used by teachers in order to repeat, to remind or to explain some information to students. Male teachers used rhetoric questions more often than female teachers, because by means of this device they attract the attention of students for a certain period of time, and keep the students in alert position:

- (g) Male teacher – *Aralarındaki ilişkiyi ortaya koymamız gerekmez mi?*
 Evet, gerekir.
 Male teacher 'Do we have to put forward the relationship between
 them? Yes, we have to.'
- (h) Male teacher – *Yakın çevre nedir? Yakın çevre arkadaşlar...*
 Male teacher 'What does near environment mean? Near environment
 guys...'

Rhetorical questions are used as a way of increasing the chance for uptake of the speaker's topic. They are not part of an adjacency pair, nor is there a structural reason to induce a response (Fasold 1993: 110). Rhetorical questions point out the ob-

viousness of a current issue (Clark 1996: 377), and the speaker goes on to his / her next utterance without leaving space for an answer. Thus, in classroom discourse, by asking rhetorical questions teachers try to attract the students' attention for a certain period of time. Students know why the teachers do this and try to be more attentive to the current topic. Male teachers' more frequent use of rhetorical questions can be an indication of men's tendency to maintain and increase their authority by keeping students attentive and alert to the lesson.

4.5.

The most striking result of this survey is the male teachers' addressing the students as *arkadaşlar* 'friends'. This term is used twice by female teachers and 17 times by male teachers. This result is also in accordance with the results of the survey conducted in the Faculty of Medicine (Açıkalın 2000).

During a symmetrical discourse, this form of address is normal as gender and education differences are of no importance. In asymmetrical discourse, as in classroom discourse where the teacher's status is higher than the students', this type of address is unusual because teachers can address their students as *arkadaşlar*, but students cannot address their teachers in this way in return. The results show that male teachers are more consistent in using this type of address, which suggests that their choice of addressing serves to forefront their position of power in front of the class.

5. Evaluation of the results

When the results are evaluated according to the six universals regarding language and gender proposed by Holmes (1993), the following conclusions can be reached:

5.1.

This survey contributes to the observation that women and men develop different patterns of language use. Female teachers' usage of back channel forms as opposed to male teachers' non-usage shows that women develop patterns of language use different from those of men.

5.2.

More frequent use of tag questions and back channel forms by women also indicates women's tendency to focus on the affective functions of an interaction. From this point of view, the affective function of interaction strengthens the relationship between teacher and student. Moreover, it makes the student feel more comfortable in front of the teacher and helps him / her to express his / her opinion clearly.

5.3.

Women's more frequent usage of tag questions and back-channel forms also contribute to the hypothesis of women tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity. Female teachers, by means of these usages, establish solidarity with students. By the usage of tag questions they seek the acceptance and attendance of students and support them by back-channel forms so that the students' participation can be realized.

Moreover, women's usage of tag questions such as *di mi / de mi* as uttered in informal style indicate female teachers' sincerity in establishing solidarity with their students. Hence, in this way they develop a supportive and facilitative role in classroom discourse.

5.4.

The hypothesis that women tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase solidarity, while in formal contexts men tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase their power and status is also verified in this survey. The function of tag questions, which male teachers use to express meaning and signal certainty about the proposition expressed, and their addressing students as "arkadaşlar" contribute to this hypothesis. Tag questions expressing modal meaning such as *doğru mu / değil mi* are speaker-oriented and have the scope of affirmation of the proposition by the students; and this indicates a different function of "model tags" in an asymmetric discourse. Thus, this shows that men, in formal or semi-formal contexts tend to interact in ways that will maintain and increase their power. Men's addressing students as "arkadaşlar" also functions to indicate their power and status in front of the class.

5.5.

The fifth hypothesis, which states that women use more standard forms than men was not the focus of the survey as both female and male teachers are equally educated and use standard Turkish equally well.

5.6.

Female teachers' use of informal style in tag questions contributes to the hypothesis that women are stylistically more flexible than men. Also in asymmetrical discourse, female teachers can show the characteristics related to their gender.

Summary

To sum up, this survey conducted in the Department of Education revealed that the linguistic differences used in classrooms by male and female teachers confirm the hypothesis that female teachers have their own distinct linguistic domain. Female teachers try to establish solidarity in class and enable their students' participation in the interaction by using certain linguistic devices. In contrast, male teachers show more status and power consciousness by indicating the social distance between themselves and their students with the language they use. This study will also be continued in other departments by enlarging participant groups, and the findings will be compared to determine whether gender differences are generalizable across different departments.

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