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Linguistic gender differences among teachers of different subjects

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Women and men have distinct linguistic domains in the workplace, regarding power and solidarity relationships in their interactions; however, a particular professional code used in a workplace may play an important role in distinguishing power and solidarity relations. The purpose of the study is to determine the linguistic differences between female and male teachers in the School of Medicine and the School of Education, each school showing language use that is very different from the other. The teacher-student interactions comprise the data of the study. The results are evaluated according to the six universals regarding language and gender formulated by Holmes in 1993.

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1. Introduction

This study stems from the assumption that women and men have distinct linguistic domains in the workplace. Particular linguistic strategies used by speakers of both sexes can show the effects of the relative solidarity and status relationships in the interactions; however, a particular language used in a workplace, i.e. a professional code, may affect solidarity and power relationships when compared to other workplaces that have no specific professional code. From this point of view, this survey aims at investigating the linguistic differences between female and male university teachers from different schools. The schools in question are the Medical School and the School of Education in Eskişehir, Turkey. The reasons for choosing these two schools are as follows: In the Medical School, the teaching utilizes medical language, and medical teachers belong to a community in which a professional code is used in professional communication. They form a community of practice (Açıkalın 2000) such that in the engagement of joint activities and shared practices, medical language is always used for communication purposes. Hence, their professional code is different from the language of laypeople. On the other hand, teachers in the School of Education use a language with very little special terminology, and this language does not create any comprehension problem for outsiders. From this point of view,

the teachers' language is expected to differ substantially, depending on the schools in which they teach.

2. Methodology

The concern of the study is, therefore, to examine the linguistic differences between female and male teachers at the two schools during face to face teaching and to try to reveal the effectiveness of the code used in the different workplaces. The data are comprised of teacher-student interactions. The settings are either classroom or laboratory. Participants are two teachers of each sex from each school. The instructors from the School of Education were instructors in the Educational Sciences Department. The instructors from the Medical School were from the Histology and Anatomy Departments. The 8 teachers were between the ages of 24 and 40 and had at least 3 years of experience. The teachers who participated in the study were asked to record 45-50 minutes of their class. The recordings were transcribed, and each participants' utterances which fulfil communicative functions were counted: female teachers from the School of Education had 921 utterances and male teachers 1013 utterances during their face to face teaching, whereas female teachers from the Medical School had 877 and male teachers had 850 utterances in the same situation.

The data are classified according to the frequency of tag questions, rhetorical questions and addressing as "arkadaşlar" (friends-guys). These were, then, evaluated based on the six universals regarding language and gender formulated by Holmes in 1993 (Bergvall 1999: 291):

- (1) women develop different patterns of language use;
- (2) women tend to focus on the affective functions of 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 context;
- (6) women are stylistically more flexible than men.

This survey is an example of an asymmetrical discourse. In asymmetrical relations power is held by the person in the one-up position, and in Brown and Gilmen's words, one person may be said to have power over another to the degree that he is able to control the behavior of the other (Tannen 1993:169). In our case, teachers are in the position of controlling the class and holding power. However, during face to face teaching power is not the only relation; it stands in paradoxical relation to solidarity, that is, although power and solidarity, distance and closeness, seem at first to be opposites each also entails the other (Tannen 1993:167). Hence, during their

teaching, female and male teachers reflect both power and solidarity in asymmetrical relations with their students.

3. Results

3.1.

In the Medical School the frequency of tag question use among the female teachers is 25, and for the male teachers it is 4. In the School of Education the frequency of tag questions among the female teachers is 15 and 8 among the male teachers.

3.1.1.

Among the tag questions, 22 speaker-oriented tags, termed by Holmes (1984) as having modal meaning, are used by the female teachers and 2 by the male teachers in the Medical School.

(a) *Nöroindofin basıncı tamam mı?*
'The pressure of neuroendorphin, ok?'

(b) *Plantiformisi yaptık tamam mı?*
'You're at the cortex at the moment, ok?'

In the School of Education the female teachers did not prefer to use speaker-oriented tags, while the male teachers used 5 speaker-oriented tags out of 8 tag questions:

(c) ... *sınıftaki öğrenciye dürüst vatandaşı zor anlatırsınız, doğru mu?*
'... you may have difficulties in explaining an honest citizen, right?'

Speaker-oriented modal tags signal the speaker's degree of certainty about the proposition expressed (Coates 1993: 120). By using them, teachers ask the students to confirm the teachers's proposition while teaching in the laboratory in front of a cadaver or a microscope, or in the classroom.

3.1.2.

Another kind of tag, having addressee-oriented function are facilitative tags. These indicate concern for students' understanding and invite students to participate in the discourse. In the Medical School, the female teachers used 3 (out of 25) and the male teachers used 2 (out of 4) addressee-oriented facilitative tags, as in the next example:

(d) *Plazmı vardı değil mi?*
'It had plasm, didn't it?'

In the School of Education the female teachers' tag usage contained all addressee-oriented tags, i.e. 15, while the male teachers used 3 (out of 8) addressee-oriented tags:

- (e) *Evet deprem korkusu değil mi?*
'Yes, the fear of earthquakes, right?'

Facilitative tags also include informal style tags such as “di mi / de mi”, a short form of “değil mi”. Regardless of the school they taught in, the female teachers used informal style tags (in the Medical School: 1 and the School of Education: 7):

- (f) *Lümen düzenli di mi?*
'Lumen is orderly, right?'
- (g) ... *kuram ve yapıların bilgisi, hatırladınız de mi?*
'... you remembered the theory and the structure, right?'

3.2.

The frequency of rhetorical questions used by female teachers in the Medical School is 6, and by male teachers 13. Similarly in the School of Education, the use of rhetorical questions is 8 by female teachers and 13 by male teachers. In asymmetric discourse such as classroom interaction, rhetorical questions are used by teachers in order to repeat, to remind or to explain some information to students. Clark (1996: 377) terms rhetorical questions “staged communicative acts” and adds that there is no need for an answer to them.

Male teachers use rhetorical questions more often than female teachers because by means of this device they can attract the attention of students for a certain period of time and keep the students alert, which may be an indication of men’s tendency to maintain and increase their authority by keeping students attentive and alert to the lesson.

3.3.

The frequency of addressing students as “arkadaşlar” (friends-guys) in the Medical School is 2 by female teachers and 15 by male teachers. Similarly in the School of Education it is used only once by the female teacher and 15 times by the male teachers:

- (h) ... *bir üst tarafta, arkadaşlar, şurada ...*
'... at the higher part, guys, here it is ...'
- (i) ... *evet, arkadaşlar sınıf yönetimi modelleri...*
'... ok, guys, models of class management ...'

During a symmetrical discourse this kind of addressing is normal, as gender and educational differences are of no importance. In asymmetrical discourse, such as classroom discourse, where the teacher’s status is higher than the students’, this type of address is unusual, since teachers can address their students as “arkadaşlar”, but not vice versa.

Results show that male teachers are more consistent in using this type of address, which suggests that with their choice of address type they forefront their powerful position in front of the class (Açıkalın 2001: 230).

4. Evaluation of results

When the results are evaluated based on the six universals regarding language and gender proposed by Holmes (1993) the following conclusions are reached:

4.1.

This study contributes to the statement that women and men develop different patterns of language use. The frequency of tag question use by female teachers in both schools is more than that of male teachers (40 for females, 12 for male teachers).

4.2.

More frequent use of facilitative tags by female teachers (18 to 5) suggests that women tend to focus on the affective functions of interaction more. They use these tags to support the students, as they feel responsible for ensuring the interaction proceeds smoothly. Female teachers, with the usage of facilitative tags, try to develop a supportive role; they invite their students to contribute to the discourse.

However, the difference between the number of facilitative tags used by female teachers in both schools (Medical School: 3, School of Education: 15), is probably due to the differences in the structure of the subject matter and professional code. In the Medical School, the topics are more scientific, whereas in the School of Education the topics include the humanities and educational sciences. Therefore, through the medical language, medical students are exposed to more visual elements such as tissues or cadavers in laboratories, whereas education students are open to discuss abstract topics.

Another reason is that in the Medical School female teachers introduce and explain the facts in medical language in a laboratory setting where every material thing is seen clearly. And consequently, the female teachers use more modal tags in the Medical School than the teachers in the School of Education, and these modal tags are speaker-oriented, signalling the teachers' degree of certainty about the subject at hand.

In the School of Education, on the other hand, in classroom settings the female teachers try to elicit the information about the topic from the students; they encourage the students to participate in the lesson by using addressee-oriented facilitative tags.

4.3.

Moreover, women's usage of facilitative tag questions, which also include the informal tags "di mi / de mi" indicates the female teachers' sincerity in establishing solidarity with their students. These informal tags are not used by the male teachers.

Furthermore, in the School of Education, the female teachers used them in order to encourage the students' participation. The use of tag questions or facilitative tags by female teachers contributes to the hypothesis of women's tendency to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity. The female teachers, thus, by using informal style tags establish solidarity and friendly-like behavior with their students.

4.4.

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 male teachers' addressing their students as "arkadaşlar" contributes to this hypothesis. It indicates their power and status in front of class. By using it they tend to show solidarity with the students, but as this type of address is not used reciprocally in an asymmetrical discourse, they are actually forefronting their position of power before the class. In other words, male teachers in order to maintain and increase their authority and power in class, use this type of address more than female teachers.

4.5.

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 exclusively.

4.6.

The female teachers' use of the 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.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this survey conducted in the Medical School and the School of Education revealed differences between the language used in classrooms / laboratories by female and male teachers. Another important fact found in this study is that the differences of subject matter, and hence the professional codes used in these two schools, contributes to the linguistic differences between teachers of the same gender in different workplaces. Furthermore, although male teachers seemed to always be status and power conscious in front of the students, the female teachers' frequent usage of tag questions shows that they are not so conscious of status and power as their male colleagues. A greater use of modal tags by the female teachers of the Medical School in comparison to the female teachers at the School of Education indicates that the former tried to signal their degree of certainty about their subject matter, and that by using the medical language, they tried not to leave any space for the students' discussions. In contrast, in the School of Education the female teachers seemed to provide the students more opportunities to participate or to discuss. As a

result, in workplaces such as schools, subject matter and professional code play an important role in determining the linguistic differences within the same gender as well as between different genders.

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