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Identifying the linguistic genderlects of the style of writing of Arab male and female novelists

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Abstract

The studies of differences in language used by males and females appear mainly to have been focused on the spoken word and rarely on writing. This paper examines some linguistic differences that exist in male and female writing styles of Arabic novels. Some classes of lexical and syntactic features that identify the author's gender are specified. The paper finds significant differences in the frequent use of some features such as colour, tag questions, verb vs. noun in initiating paragraphs, slang, taboo and euphemistic terms. In particular, males tend to use many more nouns in initial paragraphs compared to females who tend to use fewer of this category. Females are more conservative in using sex-related words whether implicitly or explicitly. Females generally speaking seem to be more attentive and more likely to pay specific attention to detail, which in turn influences their style. Finally, a noticeable correlation between the characteristics of male-female writing and the literary genre (novel) is demonstrated.

The source material consists of two modern novels written by a male and a female, who are native speakers of Arabic and considered as canonical figures by some Arab and Jordanian critics.

Key words: gender, novel, style, male, female, writing, differences, linguistics.

Introduction

A major topic in socio-linguistics is the connection between structures, vocabularies, phonology, morphology and ways of using particular language by the men and women who speak and write such languages. Do men and women who speak and write a particular language use it in different ways and styles? If they do, what are these differences? In fact, the possible differences in linguistic styles between males and females have motivated considerable socio-linguistic research over the years.

The split between "masculine" and "feminine" is probably as old as language itself. Human beings seem to have a natural tendency to divide things into pairs: good/bad, light/dark, subject/object and so on. It is not surprising then, that the male-female dichotomy on the basis of their language pattern use, in general, constitutes two different categories. The question of male-female language differences has generated a considerable amount of thought and discussions, particularly among linguists and socio-linguistics over the last twenty years. That there are differences between women's language and men's language is hardly a matter of dispute. Numerous researchers have described women's language as being different from that of men's (Baron 1986). Charles de Rochefort, cited in Otto Jesperson, observes: "the men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand,

the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men" (Rochefort 1665 in Jesperson 1922, p. 237). In the same vein, Janet Holmes stresses that women and men talk and write differently (Holmes 1996, p. 150). Research in Britain, America and New Zealand reveals similar gender-based patterns of discourse.

The scientific investigation of gender-linked language is a discipline which began four decades ago. Research on language and gender falls into two major categories. The first has to do with gender-based ideologies or sexism in language. The second is concerned with language and gender from the view of difference in the actual styles of men and women. The focus of this study will be the approach of difference, which emphasizes the idea that women and men belong to different subcultures and the differences in women's and men's writing styles are interpreted as reflecting and maintaining gender specific subcultures.

The Purpose of the Study

The works of the American sociolinguist William Labov (Labov 1966, Labov 1990) and the British anthropologist and sociolinguist Peter Trudgill (Trudgill 1972, Trudgill 1974), paved the way for other sociolinguists to study scientifically language variation and the role assigned to gender as a sociolinguistic factor. Their studies indicated that males and females use different language forms in their speech patterns. Robin Lakoff (Lakoff 1975), Jennifer Coates (Coates 1998) and Deborah Tannen (Tannen 1990) pushed forward W. Labov's and P. Trudgill's argument by emphasizing the idea that women's language compared to men's language on the level of conversational styles has certain linguistic distinctive features. From 1960s to 2010, a large body of research has been devoted to investigating male-female speech pattern differences. Data was mostly collected from conversations and personal interviews. On the other hand, little research has been done to identify male-female writing styles that are speech-oriented. This study is meant to answer the following question:

Can one identify whether a novel is written by a male or a female novelist by scanning a sample of some linguistic features on the basis that are evident in the novels under investigation?

If the answer is in the affirmative, the findings may be used as a step towards developing a checklist of the linguistic features of the style of writing of Arab male and female novelists. This may help in producing a computerized program that could easily identify the author's gender of this literary genre.

Methodology

Data collection. The data of the study reported here is drawn from two novels. One is written by an Arab male novelist (*When Wolves get Older*) by Jamal Naji and the other by a female novelist, Samiha Khrais (*The Tree of The Leopards: Love Rhymes*). The two novelists are Jordanians and classified as prominent figures by many critics, in addition, they have produced numerous different novels.

Data Analysis. The researcher will analyze the discourse of the two targeted novels on the level of word and sentence according to the variables of the designed checklist. Then an attempt is made to reveal quantitatively and qualitatively the linguistic differences between the styles of the two writers.

Study Limitations

The researcher will examine only the following linguistic distinctive features of male and female writing patterns provided by Shlomo Argamon, Moshe Kopple, Jonathan Fine and Anat Rachel Shimoni (Argamon, Kopple, Fine, Shimoni 2003), J. Holmes (Holmes 1993), Jenny Cheshire (Cheshire 1978), R. Lakoff (Lakoff 1975), P. Trudgill (Trudgill 1974), Walt Wolfram (Wolfram 1969) and John L. Fischer (Fischer 1958):

1. Taboo Terms,
2. Slang versus Standard,
3. Colour,
4. Tag questions,
5. Noun versus verb Initiating Paragraphs,
6. Euphemism.

Significance of the Study

A considerable body of gender-based literature has focused on every day conversations. Data was mostly derived from interviews, censuses, taped material and surveys. In contrast, this research is among the few studies that focus on gender attributed written-language differences, particularly novels as a literary genre.

Related Studies

Compared to speech, writing is an invention that came late in human history. In effect, some languages have not yet benefited from this invention. Children learn their first language as an oral entity through the process of socialization. This primacy of speech over writing explains the small number of studies that tend to examine gender difference in writing. On the other hand, many studies investigated gender-verbal difference in many languages. The study of writing is still a relatively new interest in the area of sociolinguistics. According to Leonard Bloomfield, "writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks" (Bloomfield 1933, p. 21). Speech and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. Judith A. Boser observes that "among college graduates with similar communication skills, females use written communication as a means of establishing rapport more than males. In a voluntary, relatively unstructured task, females tend to write longer responses to express themselves by complete thoughts (sentences)" (Boser, Wiley 1991, p. 13).

Females are also more likely to use first person singular pronouns and first singular possessive adjectives. J. Boser's study is an example of examining differences between male-female writing styles.

Cate Poynton found that women use more intensifiers such as so and very. Women also tend to use more words of approximation, such as about and around (Poynton 1989).

S. Argamon *et al* pushed forward the argument of the different use of language by males and females. Their work is the first to show such intensive distinctions. They developed a new computer program that has the ability to tell whether a book is written by a man or a woman. They found that the success exceeds 80% percent. They examined 566 English language works in a variety of genres. They concluded that female writers use more pronouns (I, You, She, Their, Myself), but males prefer words that identify or determine nouns (a, the, that) and words that quantify them (one, two, more) (Argamon, Kopple, Fine, Shimoni 2003).

Linda Olsson examined a source material which consisted of 50 introductory letters written by men and 50 by women, being mainly native speakers of English. Her study included different age groups within the range of 10-50. She found differences in the way men and women write introductory letters. Women used more superlative forms, had references to far more people, and used the intensifier "really". It was interesting to find that there were generally more spelling mistakes in letters written by women than in letters written by men (Olsson 2000).

Lina Gyllgard examined English composition texts written by male and female Swedish students in upper secondary schools to see if any linguistic differences between the two genders could be found. She gave her subjects a topic entitled A portrait of my grandfather/grandmother. The class consisted of 16 girls and 16 boys. She found some gender-linguistic differences such as the use of stative and dynamic verbs. Girls used more stative verbs such as love, like, remember and think to express more feelings. But, she did not find differences in the use of adjectives. Girls used 48 adjectives compared to 46 used by the boys (Gyllgard 2007).

Martin Nykvist examined the similarities and differences between male and female fiction-writing. He collected data from pupils at an upper secondary school in central Sweden. Students were given an extract from a novel by Bernard Mac-Laverty and from that they were supposed to continue the story. His findings showed that there is little or no difference between the styles of male writing and female writing. This means that similarities are present to a larger extent than differences (Nykvist 2008).

It is obvious that current research in this domain, appears to prove that, on the whole, there are syntactic and semantic features that distinguish male's and female's styles of writing.

Results and Discussion

1. Taboo Terms (lexis refer to sex)

One stereotypical belief concerning male and female language use is that taboo language is mostly used by males. We all learn that good girls do not swear and must speak like ladies. Conversely, polite boys are taught not to cry but to behave like men. Traditionally speaking, Arab males and females use language differently due to the way boys and girls are raised linguistically. In this context, it is

not strange to hear some taboo words in conversations among male communities. But it is strange to find such words in written texts, because writers address both males and females in our conservative society.

J. Naji, in his novel *When Wolves get Older*, exaggerates the use of symbols that refer to sex and sexuality. He describes the male-female sexual activity in a way that violates to some extant the norm of social rules. He decides to repeat overtly words that refer to sex more than thirty times. The following are some examples:

- Rabah Al Wajeih: *asart nohodaha… sarat tidhak watqoolle Ikhla'a sirwalak… fakhalatoho besora wa batahtuha ala al takhit* (Naji 2008, p. 66); Rabah Al Wajeih: "I squeezed her breasts… starts laughing and says to me… Take off your underwear… I took it off quickly and laid her on the bed";
- Rabah: *Khajilt lama saro yilabo bi thakari wakhisytia* (Naji 2008, p. 343); Rabah: "got ashamed when they started examining my penis and testicles";
- Sondos: *ama fi a lial fakad kan adaoho fi al sareer radeean* (Naji 2008, p. 168); Sondos: "He was active in bed at night".

In contrast, S. Khrais, even though, she employs sex as an element in her novel *The Tree of The Leopards: Love Rhymes*, she does it politely. This is an example:

- *Zawjat abi al ama tamam asa tamshi, la tafaseel tashi bil onotha, la nahd yartafi wa la ajz yatadawar* (Khrais 2002, p. 10); "My father's wife aunt Tamam, walks like a stick, without womanly signs, no high breast nor rounded back".

The linguistic analysis reveals that the male writer uses the sexual terms explicitly and frequently, but the female writer is more cautious and conservative in using such terms neither explicitly nor implicitly.

These findings emphasize J. Coates' point of view, that women do not use explicit taboo language because such use is condemned among women. In contrast, men do not have these strict rules and it was therefore more accepted for them to use that kind of language (Coates 1993).

2. Slang Versus Standard

Slang terms are noticed in casual speech within a certain or local group of people. This phenomenon is recorded in the female's novel. S. Khrais uses hundreds of slang words all through her novel. She picks out slang words that refer to her local place of living (North Jordan). Some of these terms are probably difficult to be understood even by southern Jordanians. The following are some examples:

- *kal Fhaid tuz* (Khrais 2002, p. 18); "Fhaid says: shit";
- *awlad al shagran bidhum yaklo mal abona* (Khrais 2002, p. 28); "Shagran's sons want to thieve our father's wealth"
- *hasa oskuti* (Khrais 2002, p. 43); "Be silent now";
- *laweesh al za abra* (Khrais 2002, p. 49); "Why this fuss?".

In contrast J. Naji does not use any slang word. In this case, one can conclude that the frequent use of slang in written texts may turn out to be a linguistic characteristic of female novelists.

3. Colour

According to R. Lakoff "women make far more precise discriminations than do men" (Lakoff 1975, p. 8). She suggested that precise colour terms such as lavender, mauve and aquamarine is a feature of female speech. In the study reported here, no such colour terms were recorded in either novel. It is apparent that S. Khrais uses more colour terms compared to J. Naji. Her diction of colour is much richer than J. Naji's. S. Khrais for example uses the following colours: pearl, green, white, red and black. The difference between S. Khrais and J. Naji is in the frequency of occurrence of colour. S. Khrais repeats colour terms more than fifty times, while J. Naji does not use such terms more than ten times.

4. Tag Questions

R. Lakoff emphasized that tag questions are symbols of lack of confidence (Lakoff 1975, p. 61). They are used when speakers seek confirmation. Many studies revealed that these types of questions are frequently used by females. The analysis of the two novels reveals that, the female novelist uses this technique more than fifty times. She employed it twice in one page (Khrais 2002, p. 83, 110, 115, 137). On the other hand, the male novelist does not use this type of question even once.

Examples from The Tree of Leopards:
- *meen? almaseeh?* (Khrais 2002, p. 110);
  "who? Jesus?";
- *mutaakidah? yaani mish bakeer?* (Khrais 2002, p. 115);
  "Are you sure? Isn't it early?";
- *yani shugl alnaqabat wabalaweeha bidoh yinfaa?* (Khrais 2002, p. 197);
  "Workers Unions struggle is useless?";
- *Yatara intifadit aljanop bitgair alahwal?* (Khrais 2002, p. 197);
  "Could the Intifida in the south change the situation?".

5. Noun versus Verb Initiating Paragraph

The analysis shows that the male novelist prefers starting his paragraphs with nominal sentences that start with nouns or pronouns. J. Naji used this technique more than three hundred and fifty times out of one thousand, seven hundred and sixty paragraphs with the percentage (19.8%). The following are some examples:
- *Azmi alwajeeh* (Naji 2008, p. 7), "Cats" (Naji 2008, p. 9), "Five years" (Naji 2008, p. 12), *Abu Sabri* (Naji 2008, p. 13), *Jalila* (Naji 2008, p. 22), *Um Azmi* (Naji 2008, p. 53), *omi* (Naji 2008, p. 164), *alsheekh* (Naji 2008, p. 201).

The total percentage of using nouns in initiating paragraphs is 19.8%. On the contrary, the female novelist tended to use verbs to start her paragraphs. She used verbs more than four hundred times out of one thousand and twenty eight paragraphs with the percentage (38.9). The following are some examples:

- *manahoni, aradatni, Zam* ("gave me", "wanted me", "cosed") in one page (Khrais 2002, p. 7).

One can notice the great difference between the male and female styles in the frequent use of nouns and verbs as initials of their paragraphs.

6. Euphemism

The euphemistic phenomenon refers to words and phrases that people use to replace other words and terms because the latter are not socially appropriate. This literary phenomenon is rarely employed in the two novels. J. Naji for example has employed a limited number of such words that related to sex and sexuality as a topic. Examples:

- *Jalila lam takunn hamia mithil Sondos. Sondos nar nar* (Naji 2008, p. 66); "Jalila was not sexy as Sondos. Sondos... sexy... sexy... hot" (fire means lusty or sexy);
- *makinati sarat tishtgil bi irtikha* (Naji 2008, p. 66); "My machine does not work well" (machine means the male organ);
- *saqatat yadi ala makan hasas bian fakhthaih, fa stadamat bi jism salb* (Naji 2008, p. 77); "Hit my hand between his thighs, crashed into something hard" (some thing hard means erect penis).

In S. Khraise's novel, the analysis does not pick any example. This lack of euphemistic terms in male and female novels could be attributed to the level of education of both writers and expertise in writing for the public and to the pressure of the Jordanian conservative society.

Summary and Conclusion

Language socialization has a major influence on how males and females use language. Girls for example learn to be more careful in their speech, while boys tend to show their strength and power through language. D. Tannen (Tannen 1993) and J. Coates (Coates 1993) supports the claim by declaring that language and gender are "inextricably linked" and both our gender and language are "developed through our participation in everyday social practice". As a result, there are linguistic differences in the way males and females use the writing medium when they write their novels. One of the most striking differences is the openness in using taboo sexual terms in the male-written novel. Female novelists use more tag questions especially when they discuss private issues and feelings. Other features concerning slang and initiating paragraphs with verbs or nouns revealed gender-related difference. As the research material analyzed is not sufficient, one needs to analyze more literary novels, in order for the findings of this study to be generalized, as a step towards developing a checklist of gender linguistic differences of the style of writing that could help readers to identify the gender of the writer from his/her written text.

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