

INGRID C. VAN ALPHEN

ENGLISH SUMMARY*

VARIATION IN VERBAL INTERACTION (F/M). A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY INTO THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF SPEECH STYLES OF DUTCH ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND BOYS. Amsterdam 1999: Academic Press ISBN 90-9013303-8. 224 pgs. PH.D. Dissertation in Dutch.

(*Variatie in verbale interactie (v/m). Een sociolinguistisch onderzoek naar de vorm en de functie van het taalgebruik van adolescenten meisjes en jongens)

The goal of this study is to obtain systematic insight into the linguistic nature of gender differences in verbal interaction. The study presents empirical research on the form and function of utterances of Dutch girls and boys in same-sex triads (N=96). The data consists of 32 informal task-oriented conversations between 15-year-old adolescents. The form of the conversations (“what is said”) is analyzed in terms of lexical-grammatical entities that connect turns of different speakers. The function of these contributions to the conversations is localized by means of a speech act typology (“what is done”). The relation between form and function is also analyzed.

The central question is whether girls’ conversations contain more linguistic elements connecting the turns of the different speakers than boys’ conversations. These connections are called connectivity. Connectivity is postulated as a linguistic operationalisation of the alleged co-operative (or affiliative, or supportive) female speech style.

Chapter 1 is a historical review of ‘the problem’ of language and gender. It concludes that the research focus in this domain has shifted from the verbal ability of girls and boys (early 20th century: deficit), to male dominance through language (feminist 70s: dominance), to a subcultural perspective (80s: difference), to the abolition of generalizations (90s: diversity) and back to the need for a comprehensive theory about language and gender (‘99: societal dualism).

Chapter 2 reviews the literature about gender-specific speech styles in adult and children’s conversations. The conclusion is that there is evidence for gender differences in relation to conversational intentions. The precise linguistic manifestation of such intentions is nevertheless still unclear. A female speech style is widely described as oriented towards others and towards the conversation itself - a joint production of text and meaning. A male speech style or orientation is said to be more concerned with the speaker himself, and with his own contribution to the conversation. These speech styles are often called co-operative and competitive.

Chapter 3 further explores the social, cultural and psychological influences involved in the creation of these speech styles. Based on the theories of Chodorow, Gilligan, Maltz and Borker, the claim is made that girls are more oriented towards symmetrical relations, and are likely to cover up asymmetrical relations. Boys are oriented towards the creation of asymmetrical relations, and tend to cover up symmetrical ones. A variety of causes are assumed to explain these differences: gender difference in identity-formation; same sex peer-groups, especially during adolescence; and social-cultural pressure of parents, school, media and literature.

In order to gain systematic insight into the linguistic means that indicate such differences in orientation, the alleged symmetric orientation of girls is operationalised, via the shift of the notion

cooperativity into the notion connectivity. Connective linguistic entities are lexical, grammatical and interactional elements that institute anaphorical or cataphorical relations between sentences (turns) of different speakers. The central hypothesis of the empirical study is that girls' conversations contain more of these connective devices than boys' conversations.

Chapter 4 describes the data-collection and the underlying methodological considerations. In order to create comparable conversations, all girls and boys triads were asked to negotiate a joint 'wish' for a well-known Dutch television program, "Geef Nooit Op" ("Never Give Up"; BBC:"Jim will fix it"). These conversations lasted approximately seven minutes and were fully recorded and transcribed. The conversations were collected in schools in two different places in the Netherlands and had the same basic interactional pattern. One of the group formulated a desire or wish (e.g. "let's go bungee jumping") which could be modified, elaborated, refused or agreed upon. Questions were asked; the conversation was organized ("please go on"); there were jokes, alternative proposals, laughter or gossip. This chapter also reports on the attitudes of the adolescents towards their own conversations. More girls than boys reported "yes" when asked in a questionnaire if their conversation had been pleasurable. If this was not the case, the boys stated bluntly "no"; the girls embedded their negative answer with arguments and excuses.

All utterances of all conversations were fully transcribed and coded by means of Childes (The speech-analysis coding computer program).

Chapter 5 presents the research variables and research questions. The data consisted of 6308 utterances. These are first divided into four main interactional types: Turns, Back channels, Laughter, and a remaining category Varia. For all utterances the interactional type was also established: initiation or reaction.

The turns (sentences on the topic of negotiating a wish, n=3947) are further analyzed according to the type of speech act (15 types), anaphorical elements (11 types) and cataphorical elements (7 types). MLU and occurrences of simultaneous speech was established. The unit of analysis was the turn. The data were statistically analyzed, mainly with the T-test (*p<.05).

Chapter 6 (results) first sketches the content of the girls' and boys' wishes. The girls' wishes were more adventurous than the boys', and they combined more separate wishes than the boys.

Secondly, the analysis of the **global speech patterns** revealed that, although the girls conversations were significantly longer than those of the boys, there were no gender differences in proportional use of Turns (60%), Back channels (8%), Laughter (17%) and Varia (15%). Reactive utterances were more common in the girls' conversations: 3 to 1 compared to initiating utterances. In the boys' conversations, this proportion was 2 to 1. The minimal response "hmm" was hardly used in this corpus (4 times) and the girls ended their utterances significantly more often than the boys with laughter ("hihi").

As expected, the **speech act analysis** revealed the use of significantly more topic-continuing speech acts and of more agreement in the girls' conversations. They made significantly more use than the boys of advance acts and positive judgements, and initiated more questions and co-proposals. The boys joked more than the girls and repeated their contributions more often than the girls did: the so-called self-advance act. Unexpectedly, the girls also used significantly more speech acts that disagreed with the contributions of others, especially negative judgements ("No, I don't like that at all").

The **lexical-grammatical analysis** revealed that the girls indeed connected their turns more frequently by means of linguistic elements than the boys did. In particular, they significantly used more anaphorical entities such as additive conjunctions, ellipsis, reference, expansion, and they echoed each others' turns in exactly the same words. More turns of the girls were voluntarily ended: they 'tailed off' their sentences in order to let others proceed the talk. The boys used more imperative sentences and attention-getters ("*man!*").

Chapter 7, which analyzed the relation between the form and function of the turns unexpectedly showed that girls not only made more negative judgements than the boys did (chapter 6), but that there was no evidence of a linguistic softening of those dis-preferred contributions. They reinforced the semantic content of their disagreement by means of attention-getters ("No, not that *man!*"), adversative conjunctions, derogatory substitutions ("Not those *fags*"), onomatopoeic sounds ("Ulch", "Yak"), and tag enforcers ("that's rubbish, *hey!*"). In short, they did not cover up asymmetrical relations.

This analysis showed also that the boys used relatively more linguistic connections in their joking-turns than in their serious turns. In their joking sequences, the boys were very much other-oriented, not only in linguistic form but also in content; they were continually teasing and playing verbally with each other. The relatively greater use of imperatives and attention-getters in the boys' conversations was due to their great amount of making fun of each other. They needed more turns to get back to the original topic of conversation ("Hey man!", "Shut up!")

Chapter 8 draws the overall conclusions about the results. On the one hand, the results support generalizations about more supportive and connective use of speech in girls' conversations. On the other hand, the results reveal that girls do not hesitate to present their differing opinions to each other. In this respect, their speech style is not cooperative at all. Rather than finding a gender difference in terms of giving support, the conclusion is that there is a gender difference in terms of giving judgements. One in five turns in girls' conversations is a judgement (either positive or negative), one in ten in boys' conversations. Boys also connect their contributions with those of other boys, especially in non-serious contexts. This is considered an different (male) way of other-orientation.

The girls avoided a blunt "no" in responding afterwards to the researchers' questionnaire (Chapter 4), but did not avoid this in communicating with their female peers, which provides evidence for the existence of a communicative 'performance' directed at the outside world, in which gender-appropriate language is expected.

The results are then discussed and interpreted at greater length from different methodological and theoretical points of view: the perspective of emancipating adolescents ('times are changing'); as an artifact of the research design: saying "no" creates clarity and consensus ('the end justifies the linguistic means'); as the outcome of the relatively large corpus and the fine-graded analysis ('the eye of the beholder'); as 'female bonding through means of contrast'; and as autonomous, contrasting and separate language ('freedom within connection'). The linguistic connectedness of boys in their jokes is interpreted as male bonding through means of joking. The differences and similarities are discussed as superficial manifestations of the developmental phase of adolescence: to become a socially connected human being, and a female or male individual.

This study calls for more comparable research in mixed-sex groups, among adults and non-Dutch communities. As a consequence of the finding that the girls were unexpectedly direct in their judgements, and the boys indirect, it is suggested that the classical domain of “requests” in sociolinguistic studies of indirectness should be extended to include that of “judgements”, particularly negative ones.

If the gender difference in formulating clear judgements typifies a female speech style (and not just an adolescent phase for girls), then the question is relevant whether these different negotiating styles cause miscommunication in mixed-gender professional discussions. This may contribute towards to the current high drop-out rate among Dutch professional women in high positions.

The review of one century of language and gender research (Chapter 1) has shown that there is a relation between theoretical interpretations and social developments within this domain. In this respect, the results of this study - the existence of a clear and autonomous speech style of these adolescent girls - are by no means in contradiction with the current notion of “girl power”.

Dr. Ingrid.C. van Alphen
INSTITUTE FOR GENERAL LINGUISTICS
UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM
Spuistraat 210; 1012 VT Amsterdam
The Netherlands, Tel: (31)20-5253872
i.c.van.alphen@uva.nl
<http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/i.c.vanalphen>