

Full Length Research Paper

Authors' perceptions of author's gender: A myth or a truth?

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Gender plays a crucial role in the lives of human beings. From the moment of birth, the two genders are taught to follow different codes of behaviour that are compatible with the societal roles stipulated for each gender. Many linguists and sociolinguistics believe that because male and female have different life experiences, the way the two genders speak and write will differ. The question of identifying such differences has exercised linguistic researchers for decades. The studies of difference in the language used by males and females have mainly focused on phonological and lexical differences in their spoken medium and informal writing such as student essays, personal letters and electronic messaging. The language used in novels, plays and poetry seems to be an area which so far has not been thoroughly elucidated. This paper explores and examines the general beliefs whether professional authors, particularly literary writers, could perceive and identify any linguistic differences in Arab male and female novelists' style of writing. Ten Arabic-speaking Jordanian writers, five males and five females, are asked to express their opinions with regard to such difference. The results are in conformity with the findings of international gender studies, thus providing further support to the claim that the difference between male and female styles of writing is more of a truth than a myth.

Key words: Gender, author, language, perception, literary writers.

INTRODUCTION

Language and gender studies have developed greatly over the past four decades (Lakoff, 1975; Bull and Swan, 1992; Mills, 1995; Ehrlich, 1997; Biber and Burges, 2000; Pavlenko and Piller, 2007). In this context, the style of writing and gender has constituted a topic for heated debate particularly in sociolinguistic research¹. Most of the literature on language differences between men and women concentrates on two main approaches. The first is the approach of dominance (Lakoff, 1975; Fishman 1983) while the second is the approach of difference (Coats, 1986). The dominance theory claims that difference in language use which can be attributed to gender is a consequence of male dominance and female

subordination. In contrast, proponents of the difference approach (Coats, 1986; Tannen, 1990) believe that men and women do belong to two different subcultures, which implies that all linguistic differences can be attributed to cultural differences. Girls, for example, learn to be more careful in their speech while boys do not mind showing strength, power and aggression (Tannen, 1990). Moreover, Coats (1993) claims that language and gender are "inextricably linked and both our gender and language are developed through our participation in everyday social practices. Kyratzis and Cook-Gumperz (2008) provided an extensive review of three theories that explained how children develop gendered practices in

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their culture. The first is language socialization theory which claims that children learn gender-related values of their culture through participating in daily and routine language interactions. The second is the Separate World Hypothesis (SWH) which claims that boys and girls grow up in separate sub-cultures and thus develop different ways of language use. The third argues that children and adults belong to two different cultures.

Bucholtz (2003) presented an overview of some approaches to discourse analysis and how they were utilized to study gender. These approaches have their roots in anthropological, sociological and critical traditions. However, the researcher concluded that these forms are not comprehensive; in effect the analysis of discourse as a social phenomenon may utilize other forms as well.

On the belief that there is a female typical style of language use, Lakoff (1975) identifies a number of linguistic features used by women such as the frequent use of tag questions, intensifiers and qualifiers, hedging devices, trivial lexis, empty adjectives and rising intonation on declaratives. In the same vein, Mehl and Pennebaker (2003) report that females tend to use more first-person singular pronouns than males.

With regard to gender difference in writing, some studies reveal that student writing styles differ depending on the writer's gender. Keroes (1990) posits that female writing focuses on personal experiences. Roen and Johnson (1992) claim that male writing styles tend to be competitive and aggressive. Tannen (1990) reports that women talk more about relationships than men; they also apply frequent apologies and complements (Holmes, 1989).

It is worth noting that the bulk of language- gender studies have investigated phonological and some pragmatic differences in the use of spoken language between males and females (Trudgill, 1972; Labov, 1990; Eckert, 1998).

RELATED STUDIES

A number of gender studies attempted to produce tools and programs that aimed at enabling readers to identify the gender of the author. A more recent one is Chao-Yue (2010). The researcher collected two kinds of literature: formal and casual writing of books and blogs to capture formal and casual writing styles. He collected 47 books totaling around three million words, half of which were written by male authors and half by female authors. He also collected 48 blogs comprising around 4.22 million words. He used a Naïve-Bayes classifier with the assistance of NLTK toolkit, implemented in Bird et al., cited in Chao-Yue (2010), and trained it with frequent words as the main features, such as pronouns, punctuation marks, abbreviations and common verbs which hint on the

gender of author. He concluded that female authors tended to use more first person pronouns (I, my, our and we). Male authors, in contrast, tended to use more second and third person pronouns (you and it). For punctuation marks, male authors used more semicolons, while female authors preferred to use more expressive exclamation marks. Finally, for common verbs, males like to use *could*, *would* and *think*, while female authors love to show their affection with the verb *love* (italics added).

Herring and Paolillo (2006) investigated gender and genre variation in weblogs. The corpus which comprised a balanced sample of weblogs written by single male or female authors included a total of 35,721 words, 22,134 written by women and 13,587 by men. In order to examine whether variations in language use in weblogs are attributed to author gender or genre type, the researchers held blog type constant, viz., diary or filter. For this purpose, they investigated 16 stylistic features previously identified in machine learning research (and its popularization, the Gender Genie)². The features selected for investigation are female preferential features and male preferential features. While the former "are all personal pronouns: first-person singular (*I, me, my, mine*); first-person plural (*we, us, our, ours*, and 's in *let's*); third-person singular (forms of *she* and *he*, counted separately) and plural (*they, them, their, theirs*)" (p. 445), the latter "are the determiners *the* and *a/an*; demonstratives; numbers (*1, 2, 1000, one two, thousand, first, second*, etc.); other quantifiers; and the possessive pronoun *its*." (p. 445). The results showed that the diary entries contained more 'female' stylistic features, and the filter entries more 'male' stylistic features, independent of author's gender.

Janssen and Murachver (2005) examined readers' perceptions of author's gender and literary genre. The subjects were 30 undergraduate university students: 15 females and 15 males. English was the first language of all participants whose mean age was 21 years. The researchers stored 16 passages into one of two random orders and assigned a separate page in a booklet presented to the participants. After reading each passage, the participants used a rating scale to rate their perceptions of whether the author was a female or a male. Results showed that the participants were more likely to have correct perceptions of the actual gender of passage author than the discriminant analysis predicting passage author's gender and passage genre performed by Janssen and Murachver (2004) on the basis of the use of 26 linguistic features. Argamon et al. (2003) examined different genres using the British National Corpus (640 documents) with a view to identifying differences between male and female writing. For each genre, they used the same number of male and female authored documents. The researchers were able to identify many lexical and syntactic features that vary in terms of author gender such as the frequent use of determiners (*a, the, that,*

these), pronouns (I, we, you, he, etc.), common and proper nouns and quantifiers (one, two, more, some, etc.). The researchers found significant differences between male and female-authored documents in the use of pronouns and certain types of noun modifiers. For example, females tended to use more pronouns while males tended to use more noun specifiers.

Francis et al. (2003) examined lecturers' perceptions of gender and undergraduate essay-writing. Their method involved the assessment of sample essays and individual interviews with academics. One hundred academics participated: 50 history lecturers (25 men and 25 women) and 50 psychology lecturers (25 men and 25 women). The participants were asked to mark two sample essays, one written by a male student and one by a female. In particular, they were asked to guess the gender of the student essay author. Their findings indicated that "of those persuaded to take a guess, women only guessed correctly on 20 occasions (two-fifths), and men in 27 instances (just under one-half)" (p. 359). These results showed that academics tended to find it difficult to guess a student author's gender. In effect, this task was "far more difficult than might have been expected given notions of 'female writing' and so on" (p. 360). Moreover, many participants were hesitant to take a guess "for fear of stereotyping, or being perceived as sexist" (p. 360).

METHODOLOGY

A certain relationship between the text and its creator in terms of gender has been predicted in informal, spoken interaction and formal written texts. Gender literature concluded that gender is difficult for authors to hide and for audiences to ignore. To explore the dimensions of this relationship, ten professional and experienced Jordanian writers (five males and five females) with a mean age of 40 years were chosen to participate in this study. The participants were requested to provide answers the following two questions:

1. As authors of different literary genres, do you think that women writers and men writers use language differently?
2. If the answer is in the affirmative, what linguistic features can you identify as specific to the writing style of each gender type?

The subjects included novelists, critics, poets and essay writers. Each participant authored at least one book with some of them authoring more than ten novels. Eight participants are PhD holders and lecturers on Arabic literature in Jordanian universities.

One of the researchers who happened to be a friend or colleague of the participants arranged for each of them to receive a copy of the questions. The participants were requested to answer the questions in the form of an essay, which they did in less than a month's time. The length of the answers ranged between 70-300 words. The following section provides an analysis of the answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants' written contributions are examined in

light of the two study questions. First, the authors' perceptions of language gender differences are outlined and discussed. A similar treatment is then applied to the linguistic features associated with the writing style of male and female literary writers as perceived by the participants.

Authors' perceptions of language gender differences

Four of the five male participants posited that language gender differences are a de facto. What follows is that the texts produced by male and female literary writers, mainly novelists and poets, tend to surface manifestations of these differences. The fifth participant who happened to be mainly a critic and a short story writer was rather hesitant to acknowledge gender orientation of language use. He believed that the writer is the product of his or her environment. To support his inclination, he argued that male and female creative writers who were brought up in a romantic environment, for instance, would essentially use similar vocabulary, imagery and language patterns.

The perceptions of the five female participants were essentially similar to those of their male counterparts. While three participants clearly stated that the writing styles of male and female artists are definitely distinct, two reported that such differences are either not existent or too few to warrant drawing any specific conclusions. The participants who reported that they could identify the gender of the text writer agreed that their ability to do so is mainly intuitive. Of these respondents, one posited:

This issue remains controversial to a large extent. Although the educated reader and practitioner can 'feel' the gender identity of the author intuitively, s/he will find it extremely hard to consciously justify this 'feel'. To sum up, the existence of distinct male text and female texts is an undisputed truth.

On the other hand, one respondent of those who did not acknowledge author gender difference of texts ascribed this to the masculinity of the Arabic language. She added, "As far as creative writing is concerned, the reader will not be able to identify the gender identity of the writer. The other respondent said:

I do not find any differences between men and women in the use of language, particularly in Western communities, thanks to progress in scientific thought and education. In the context of Arabic writing, women writers may be less skilful than men writers. If any, the difference is in experience. This may be attributed to historical reasons because men dominated the writing scene long, long time ago before women joined in.

If the responses of male and female participants are amalgamated, we conclude that 70% of the professional writers indicated that language gender difference was a fact of life. They even claimed that they could identify,

though intuitively, the gender of a given text. What remains to be examined is the extent to which these insights are valid, an issue that has to await further research. In this context, we suggest the use of a technique, similar to one used by psycholinguistics, that is acceptability judgments, when investigating language competence in non-native speakers (Hamdan and Al Jallad, 2008) where the subjects are given a set of sentences (including acceptable/grammatical and unacceptable/ungrammatical ones) and asked, on the basis of intuition, to judge their acceptability. Likewise, the participants, professional writers or otherwise (to enable comparisons) will be introduced to a set of short texts extracted from longer ones belonging to a particular genre written by male and female authors and asked to judge their gender identity (Francis et al., 2003).

While research on author gender identity has received considerable attention in contexts where the language of the investigated texts is mainly English, one hardly finds studies involving the use of Arabic. This may be ascribed to a host of reasons, e.g., social, political and cultural, among others. In this regard, a female participant in the study reported here ascribed the scarcity of research in this area to the lack of focus given to this topic by Arab scholars due to the limited number of Arab women contributions and the limited scope of their themes compared with those of men. Another woman participant said that women writers were mainly educated and influenced by the writings of males. This, she added "motivated some of them to imitate the male writing style, which makes it more difficult to identify the gender of the author."

Linguistic features of male and female writing style

Below is a summary of the linguistic and stylistic features proposed by each group of respondents for each type of author's gender. The male participants cited that the following features are more evident in women's writings than in men's:

1. Frequent use of exaggeration and hyperbole as literary devices
2. Egocentrism which explains the obvious ego manifestations in the text
3. Dominance of the language of sadness and deprivation
4. Frequent use of monologue and soliloquy
5. Breaking the barriers of religion, sex and politics
6. Use of poetic language
7. Frequent use of words expressing feelings, emotions and nostalgia
8. Skilful use of words related to women's clothing, perfume, powders, sleeping and sleeping habits, birth and motherhood as well as feelings associated with sexual practices;

9. Attending to small and minute details in description
10. Limited romantic imagination leading to limited innovation and symbolism
11. Frequent use of long sentences and repetition of sentence patterns and ideas
12. The ratio of quality literature, particularly poetry, among women is lower than that among men.
14. Imitation of mainstream styles and language use which shows up in rare development of one's own and unique style
15. A greater number of syntactic and spelling errors compared with those made by men

Before we outline the responses of women writers, it is worth noting that the main focus of male participants was on the features of women's writing styles. They placed little emphasis on the traits of their own product. It seems that they adopted a strategy of negation, that is features of men's writing are anything but not those included in women's. Among the very few features mentioned explicitly by the male participants as characterizing the writing style of men authors are the following:

1. Greater use of the language of reason and knowledge
2. Skilful use of words and expressions related to masculine needs and practices (sex and parenthood)
3. Use of words and expressions different from those used by women to show power, weakness, will, love and loyalty
4. More detailed description of places, events and characters

Now we turn to the features cited by women writers. Unlike their counterparts, women described their own writing style and almost said nothing about that of men. The features were as follows:

1. Frequent use of questions
2. Attending to small and minute details
3. Limited number of text characters
4. Passionate endings of texts
5. Simple language using direct sentences and frequent/common words
6. Extensive description of family and friend relationships
7. Little contribution to science fiction
8. Frequent use of first person pronoun
9. Frequent use of synonyms
10. Frequent use of long sentences
11. Frequent use of words expressing feelings and emotions as well as words referring to body parts, motherhood, family, home and colours
12. Use of transparent language
13. Use of simple imaginative imagery

While two male participants only alluded to some features of men's writing style, not a single female participant cited a single feature of men's writing style. Is this a mere coincidence or is it a reflection of women's egocentrism

as described by some male participants? Another possible explanation is that men were more critical of the other gender than men. What is striking is that the traits they cited were mainly negative. It seems they thought that their style was the norm and thus viewed women's style as a deviation from that norm. On the other hand, women tended to be assertive focusing on their own product, offering some balanced perspective including positive and negative traits.

Since the focus of the two groups was on the features of women's style, a further look into these traits shows that there was a reasonable amount of agreement between the subjects. With some approximation of the perceptions reported by each group, the following were viewed as being characteristic of women:

1. Attending to small and minute details
 2. Frequent use of words expressing feelings and emotions
 3. Egocentrism and frequent use of first person pronoun
 4. Limited and simple imagination
- Frequent use of long sentences

In view of the foregoing, one can safely conclude that women writers and men writers tend to think that each group uses language differently. Moreover, they agreed on a core set of features for women's writing style; however, their disagreement was more evident. In the absence of actual examination of a representative sample of texts written by each gender, whether the examination is done manually or through an Arabic-oriented Gender Genie software (yet to be developed), we would continue to base our conclusions on perceptions.

Before closing this section, a final word of caution is due. As an anonymous reviewer has rightly noted, one should not ignore the role of cultural, political, or social environment in which the language is actually used. Thus, the perceptions of participants in gender studies may be influenced by these variables. This implies that Jordanian authors' perceptions of gender orientation as outlined above may be somewhat different from those of, say Saudi or Algerian authors. Future research is expected to shed more light on this point.

Conclusion

Gender differences in discourse associated with literary genres have continued to be the focus of sociolinguistic research. It has been concluded that certain genres of writing are traditionally associated more closely with one gender than the other. The paper reported here confirms the existence of a correlation between author and gender in line with that observed by Argamon et al. (2003) and Koppel et al. (2002) in their machine research which screened and analyzed a large corpus of English written

texts. Even though this study relies on the perceptions of Jordanian writers rather than on Arabic written texts, due to the lack of machine suitable programs, the results constitute a forward step towards a thorough examination of the relationship between gender and literary genres in texts written in languages other than English.

Notes

1. An anonymous reviewer posits that examination of gender in fiction seems to be a pointless activity because language is put into the mouths of literary characters by the author of the fiction. The author uses the language attributed to fictional characters to achieve certain rhetorical and/or artistic effects. The reviewer concludes that such language is not the language spoken by real persons in real contexts.

2. The Gender Genie is available at: <http://www.bookblog.net/gender/genie.html>. Inspired by an article in the *New York Times* about Argomon and Koppel's algorithm, the Gender Genie was programmed for the Web by Rich Miller and Mary Dell, and launched on the BookBlog site on 15 August 2003.

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