WOMEN, LANGUAGE AND PEACE

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Abstract

This paper discusses the lexical, syntactic and pragmatic features of talk often associated with women and argues that such linguistic norms help women in being peacemake and in a number of domains are provided to demonstrate the useof such linguistics strategies in the discourse of women.

Introduction

Women are great peacemakers and are highly visible in peace building groups and initiatives (Sylvester, 1992). This role of women has been established in history and literature and many papers have been written about women as peacemakers in a number of spheres. Austrian Bertha von Suttner in 1905 became the first woman recipient for the Nobel Peace Prize and more recently Iranian Shirin Ebadi received an award for her work on democracy and human rights. The women of Northern Ireland have been described by Hilary Clinton as a "quiet catalyst for the Belfast Peace agreement" (Pogatchnik, 1998).

Either due to nature or nurture, women have been noted to have an innate capacity to resolve issues, conflicts, disputes and misunderstandings. Women in general have sometimes been characterised as natural pacifists (Aronof, 1986). Sirleaf, co-author of the independent expert assessment on women, war and peace for UNIFEM says, "Women are more concerned about people. They are mothers. They grow up with children. They are in the homes

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carrying the burden of the home and family. From that experience women bring a sensibility, a sensitivity to things which bring peace" (Fleshman, 2003).

It is the mother/wife who participates in several worlds at once, often moving from one to another seamlessly, with no apparent break, maintaining multiple interactions between different interlocutors in different domains. A.E. David, a writer and movie producer, in his first story says:

> A mother's place is to make calm, to make peace, and to preserve it. It is not for the mother to expose, to provoke an argument, to destroy, not for the mother to break. It is for the mother to heal, to maintain. The mother provides the balance.
>
> (David 2001:162).

Gilligan (in Sheldon 1993) a linguist, observed that females are more care-oriented while male speech is justice-oriented, often involving reasoning from a principle and thereby losing sight of and sensitivity to the needs of others. Tannen (1998), another reputed linguist, states that talk of women is for rapport while that of men is for reporting.

This paper discusses the discourse styles of women in relation to their conflict avoidance and conflict resolution postures. The discourse norms or speech styles of women are discussed to demonstrate how through their talk, conflict situations are avoided.

Sometimes it is what they do or do not say in interactions and sometimes it is the way in which it is said which makes women effective. The approach women take in the resolution of conflicts in different domains will also be discussed.

Language of Women

By way of introduction, I will describe what linguists have said about the way women talk. The notion that women speak a different language from men started back in the early 1970s with researchers calling it by different names such as 'women's

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language' (Lakoff, 1973, 1975), 'the female register' (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977); 'genderlect' (Kramer, 1974); and recently 'gender-linked language' (Mulac et.al. 1986).

The most influential among them Lakoff (1975) suggested that a distinct group of features – lexical, syntactic and pragmatic – distinguishes the speech of women as being hesitant and weak which she termed as powerless style. Women tend to avoid strong or forceful statements and use hedges i.e. ambivalent and intonation patterns that resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval. Renshaw et. al. (cited in Cutler 2003) found the largest difference of talk between men and women is the use of hedging. Hedging tends to express doubt rather than assertiveness and definitiveness. This lack of assertive stance by the avoidance of strong statements and views does to some extent prevent a conflictual situation from developing. Note the following example from a home domain:

> Husband: Give me a lift.
> Wife: Why don't you use my car?

Note that through the question form the wife did not agree or disagree with the request made. Instead, she provided an alternative, but as a question to avoid a conflict when she refused to help.

Women also tend to use tokens of language behavior which denigrate themselves. It is difficult to throw a tantrum and find oneself in conflict with one who debases and denigrates herself. An example of such denigration would be apt:

> Daughter: After the exam I want to go for a holiday with my friends. All my friends are going to Australia.
> Mother: I don't belong to your generation but during our time we returned home immediately after the exams to be with our families.

Here, the mother softens her disapproval by providing an explanation and to some extent denigrates herself.

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Women, it has been said, tend to cloak their speech in qualifiers which serve to weaken their communication. Qualifiers ("I think" and "probably") and tag constructions like "shouldn't we?" soften the force of the intended communication and weaken their communication. For instance, in the following sentence,

"*I think* we should probably notify the boss about this, *shouldn't we?*"

the use of the tag "shouldn't we?" coupled with the qualifiers "I think" and "probably" soften the intended force of the communication. Lakoff (1975) observed that, in certain contexts, women use question tags more frequently than men do. She defines the tag-question as a declarative statement without the assumption that the statement is to be believed by the addressee: "one has an out, as with questions. [The] tag gives the addressee leeway, not forcing him [sic] to go along with the views of the speaker" (Lakoff 1975:16). Tag questions are speaker-oriented and indicate a request for information or a confirmation of the statement and function as expressions of politeness.

Talking of politeness, women are more indirect and consequently come across as being more polite than men. Politeness generally begets politeness and holds at bay a situation of conflict from developing. Asmah Haji Omar, Malaysia's well-known linguist provides this example of indirectness in the requests of Malay women: (Asmah, 1995:49):

Wife: The curtains are already worn-out! It would be embarrassing if we have visitors.

Husband: Ha, they still look good. [Translated from Malay]

In the example the wife prevents a conflict by not directly asking for new curtains but through the use of an indirect strategy that gives the husband an option to turn down her request. If he does, it saves her face. In a current research we are investigating cultural norms and how they impact on the language of women.

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Another feature of women's speech which help in the avoidance of conflict developing is the use of euphemisms which are nice ways of saying something which really are not so nice. When something is said obliquely one tends to be polite and avoids a conflictual situation.

This politeness even extends to allowing men to interrupt them and take the floor from them. Researchers have counted up how much different participants talk and used this as a direct measure of conversation control (Marlatt 1970, Doherty 1974, Strodtbeck 1975, Moreau 1980, DeFrancisco 1992). Women allow men to have this control, and listen to them. Examples of such discoursal strategies in male-female talk as observed by my students follow:-

> *Example 1*: At the post office on campus, the male officer was talking with a woman who claimed that the officer gave the wrong change. He kept interrupting her to show his power even though they are from the same level as there is no superior or inferior status here. The officer interrupted to deprive the woman's ability to control their environment by setting the agenda.

> *Example 2:* A conversation between my uncle and his wife, both Chinese, 39 years old and married for the past 15 years, showed my uncle dominated the conversation by interrupting my aunty frequently. He also dominated the topic throughout. At first, both of them were discussing which school to enroll their daughter. My uncle interrupted my aunty not less than six times in the whole conversation. He also managed to maintain the topic, particularly about the distance from their house to the school and the advantages of sending the daughter to a Chinese school instead. The wife had no choice but to listen and wait for her turn to speak up. And when she had the chance to do so, very often she was interrupted before she could complete her sentence.

> *Example 3:* I was complaining to my boyfriend about something last Saturday. I just wanted him to listen to

what I had to say. However, being a typical male, he decided to cut me off midway and started dispensing advice. I was infuriated! Not only did he not let me finish, he started to do most of the talking – by telling me how to solve my problem and how I should have handled the problem in the first place. He was clearly lacking in conversational topic maintenance. I noticed that the conversation was also a power-play in progress. I disagreed with his approach many times and he responded by repeating and stressing that his method was the right one.

Holmes (1992) also found that even in the professional domain, for example, in doctor-patient conversations female doctors were interrupted more often than male physicians.

It should also be pointed out that more of women's communication is expressed non-verbally (by gesture and intonation) than men's. When words are not uttered and if facial expressions are not heeded then chances of a conflict developing are minimized.

Women's communicative style tends to be collaborative rather than competitive. This collaborative style is noted in the following advertisement by British Telecoms called "It's good to talk":

Why can't men be more like women?

Women and men communicate differently.

Have you noticed?

Women like to sit down to make phone calls.

They know that getting in touch is much more important than what you actually say.

Men adopt another position.

They stand up.

Their body language says this message will be short, sharp and to the point. 'Meet you down the pub, all right? See you there'. That's a man's call.

(Source: Conrick, 2000)

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In summary, women tend to use linguistic devices (see Table 1) that stress solidarity more often than men do and tend to interact in ways which will maintain and increase solidarity (Holmes, 1998). Holmes in fact argues that women tend to focus on the affective functions of an interaction more often than men do (Holmes, 1998: 463) and tend to use linguistic devices that stress solidarity more often than men do.

Table 1: Co-operative and Competitive Discourse Strategies

WOMEN Co-operative/ Collaborative discourse strategies	MEN Competitive Discourse strategies
• Share the floor • overlap supportively • use indirect commands • use more hedges • use minimal responses • ask questions	• Prefer a single floor • interrupt to gain floor • use direct commands • make more direct declarations • challenge/dispute utterances • swear more

(Source: Holmes, 1998: 468/472)

Tillet (1999) discussing the resolution of conflict provides a vivid description of the differences in male/female talk in Table 2:

Table 2: Differences in Male/Female Talk

Woman	Man
Tend to talk the language of feelings	Tend to talk the language of fact
Tend to disclose feelings	Do not tend to disclose feelings

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Tend to talk about changing a relationship	Tend to focus on problem solving
Tend to compromise and often appear willing to yield	Tend to be competitive

(Adapted from Tillet 1999:155)

The discourse of men has generally been described as one that could result in conflicts. Men typically use overt aggressiveness, act as experts and offer advice at the mention of a problem instead of sympathizing or sharing their own problems and make abrupt topic shifts in the conversation. Researchers have also found that men tend to dominate women by dominating talk, interrupting women and not surrendering the floor to a woman. Zimmerman and West (1975) claim that men tend to frequently divert women's topics. This is done by either responding minimally or by introducing their own topics. Sattel (1983) and Kurzon (1992) point out that men, particularly in intimate domains, are accustomed to exercising power by refraining from talk.

Peace Discourse in the Political Sphere

Well-known women in the political sphere have contributed in ensuring peace is maintained. Sonia Gandhi, for example, decided not to become India's prime minister and provided the following reason, "I would follow my inner voice. Today it tells me that I must humbly decline this post." Here she had one of the biggest nations in her hand but on the face of it gave it all up for the peace of the nation and for the success of her party. An oblique reason "listen to my inner voice" was given. In this case the use of indirect discourse was necessary to prevent a situation of conflict from developing and escalating.

One of the world's leading campaigners for democracy and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, when asked, "If someone has a confrontational mindset how do you convince them of the importance of interdependence?" She responded:

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I think that first of all, you must *listen* to that person. You've got to try to ask him to explain why he feels the way he feels. You have to ask, "Why do you hate that? Why do you think a certain color is bad?" or, "Why do you think a certain belief is bad?" Then, I think, you would have to carry on from there, because if you want to *create understanding* between two people, both sides must learn to *listen* to each other-both sides, to a certain extent, must be frank about their fears The first step is confidence building. If the two sides can start *having confidence in the other's good will*, then you can carry on from there. Then I think they will be much more *honest* and not just talk about what they hate, but what they fear. Hate and fear are the opposite sides of the same coin. It's the same thing. You don't hate unless you fear, basically. Anything that creates *understanding* in the long run makes for less violence. If there is understanding then you don't have to solve your problems through violence; you can *solve* them by just *talking* it over (Source: http://www.ibiblio.org/freeburma/assk/assk.html).

Note that her main point is the need to listen. Women are good at that. When we watch a group of men and women generally it will be the men talking and the women listening. Men generally tend to interrupt when women are talking. Interruptions mean that one is not really listening as one is just waiting one's turn to make one's views known.

In a male-dominated culture it is important to make the male listener feel secure so that they do not feel that their gender roles are being threatened. When negotiating for a seat at the peace table in Sun City South Africa one of the women said, "We approached them in a way that made them feel secure. In African culture the woman is your mother. The woman is your wife and sister. If your mother and sister are talking to you, you have to listen" (Fleshman, 2003).

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In the same study a women leader who wanted an end to war between the two nations and wanted the two leaders of the opposing nations to meet and discuss their issues finally said as if talking to willful children, "You have to meet as men and iron out your differences and we the women want to be present. We will lock you in this room until you come to your senses, and I will sit on the key." The men met!

Discourse at the Workplace

In Malaysian work sites a great deal of indirect discourse is used at the workplace especially when a superior is not happy with a subordinate. Direct conflict is thus avoided and faces of both accuser and accused are maintained. At a recent ministerial work meeting, one of the participants (a woman) was not contributing and was using her mobile to text messages throughout the meeting. When the senior officer (another woman) who was not at the meeting heard about this she veered the lunch discussion to the use of mobiles and how she constantly switched hers off during a meeting. The message was not a direct attack or accusation but the point was made and taken.

In another work related example this time in a university site the deputy dean (a woman) visited an administrative officer (another woman) in the latter's room ostensibly as a casual meeting but in the process of the conversation informed her that the dean was not happy with the latter's work. Thus a direct conflict was avoided but the message was transmitted.

This use of a third party facilitator as a rational means of resolving conflict has been mentioned by Nudler (1990). Hilary Clinton used this third party strategy when she asked a group of school children, "Would you tell your parents something for me? Ask them if they have a gun in the house please lock it or take it out of their home. Would you do that as good citizens?" (Lewis, n.d).

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Discourse in the Home Domain

Peace discourses are also often feminised in the sense that women are told to keep the peace in the home even at the expense of violence and exploitation. An appeal is made that for the sake of the children and domestic peace, women should remain quiet and acquiescent in the face of oppression and violence.

The self-sacrificial mother in order to maintain peace and her husband's ego is described in *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee*, a novel on Indians in the United Kingdom. In the novel, a daughter describes her mother's interactions with her father:

> Every bad idea he came up with (and there were many) were always hers. She stalked them, pounced on them and claimed them as soon as they went wrong.... Every good idea was usually hers, and given to him on a warm plate with a liberal dash of humble dressing. "You see? How your father was right? Such a brilliant move husbandji!"

(Syal, 1999:143).

What the child in that household learnt from her mother,

> "How to read the moods of everyone in the room and flow smoothly about them, adapting to their edges and hollows... talk in sweet tones, smile and smile at visitors and... most important , save any rages and rumbles for the privacy of my dark bedroom."

(Syal 1999:144).

Conclusion

Social science research supports the view of women as being generally more collaborative than men and thus more inclined towards consensus and compromise. Linguistic research shows that

the discourse strategies encompassing a distinct group of features – lexical, syntactic and pragmatic that women use help in keeping conflicts at bay and also help in the resolution of existing conflicts.

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