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Gender Difference in the Employment of Various Stereotypes on Iranian English Weblogs

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Abstract

Cultural stereotype plays an essential role in developing and preserving gender differences, and that speech stereotypes in particular serve to characterize the way that native speakers perceive how males and females normally talk. This paper investigates stereotypes about on-line gender difference in Iranian English weblogs.

It is hypothesized that men and women use different social and linguistic styles in on-line weblogs.

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The researchers quantitatively analyzed a number of English weblogs written by Iranians. One fourth of all used weblogs were managed by female and other weblogs were run by male.

Results of analysis of data were presented in two parts. Comparisons are made between adult and teenager male female. The results indicated that the use of so-called gender-dependent features as 'hedges', 'tag question' mostly attributed to female language and 'harsh comments' mostly attributed to male language has been resistant to change among higher age group even in computer mediated communication, namely, weblog communication. However, it is witnessed a remarkable change on use of aforementioned features in language of teen.

Key words: Computer mediated communication, Gender, Weblog communication, Iranian English weblogs

Introduction

New communication technologies are often invested with users' hopes for change in the social order. Thus the Internet is said to be inherently democratic, leveling traditional distinctions of social status, and creating opportunities for less powerful individuals and groups to participate on a par with members of more powerful groups. Specifically, the Internet has been claimed to lead to greater gender equality, with women, as the socially, politically, and economically less powerful gender, especially likely to reap its benefits.

Text-based computer-mediated communication, with its lack of physical and auditory cues, makes the gender of on-line communicators irrelevant or invisible, allowing women and men to participate equally, in contrast with traditional patterns of male dominance observed in face-to-face conversations (Danet 1998; Graddol and Swann 1989). As a network connecting geographically dispersed users, the Internet empowers women and members of other traditionally subordinate groups to find community and organize politically in pursuit of their own interests (Balka 1993).

The World Wide Web allows women to self-publish and engage in profitable entrepreneurial activity on a par with men (Rickert and Sacharow 2000). Of course, men, too, stand to benefit from anonymous communication, common-interest group formation, and the commercial potential of the Web. The difference is that for women, the Internet purportedly removes barriers to participation in domains where barriers do not exist - or at least, do not exist to the same extent - for men.

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A paradigm known as "technological determinism" (Markus 1994) - tends to overlook the fact that the development and uses of any technology are themselves embedded in a social context, and are shaped by that context (Kling et al. 2001). Does the Internet alter deeply rooted cultural patterns of gender inequality, or do those patterns carry over into on-line communication? Is Internet technology inherently gender-neutral, or does the fact that it was created by men result in an in-built structural bias that perpetuates male advantage?

At the same time, the Internet is undeniably transforming social behavior as more and more people go on-line. In the early 1990s, estimates placed the number of female Internet users at 5 per cent (Sproull 1992, cited in Ebben and Kramarae 1993); females now make up slightly more than half of all Web users (Rickert and Sacharow 2000). What are the effects of millions of girls and women entering what was, until very recently, a predominantly male domain?

A lot of researches tried to find the answer to the question of 'whether- and if so, how- gender and power relations are affected in and through the Internet communication. The whole body of these researches shows that 'gender is invisible or irrelevant on the Internet' or 'the Internet equalizes gender-based power and status differentials'.

Gender differences in on-line communication tend to disfavor women. In mixed-sex public discussion groups, females post fewer messages, and are less likely to persist in posting when their messages receive no response (Broadhurst 1993; Herring 2003). Even when they persist, they receive fewer responses from others (both females and males), and do not control the topic or the terms of the discussion except in groups where women make up a clear majority of participants (Herring 1993, forthcoming; Herring, Johnson, and DiBenedetto 1992, 1995; Hert 1997). The lesser influence exercised by women in mixed-sex groups accounts in part for why women-centered and women only on-line groups are common (Balka 1993; Camp 1996), whereas explicitly designated men-only groups are rare.

Politeness is one common means through which gender is cued in asynchronous CMC. Women are more likely to thank, appreciate, and apologize, and to be upset by violations of politeness; they more often challenge offenders who violate on-line rules of conduct (Smith et al. 1997), and predominantly female groups may have more, and more strictly enforced, posting rules designed to ensure the maintenance of a civil environment (Hall 1996; Herring 1996a). In contrast, men generally appear to be less concerned with politeness; they issue bald face-threatening acts such as unmitigated criticisms and insults, violate on-line rules of conduct, tolerate or even enjoy "flaming," and tend to be

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more concerned about threats to freedom of expression than with attending to others' social "face" (Herring 1994, 1996a, 1999).

Some evidence suggests that women participate more actively and enjoy greater influence in environments where the norms of interaction are controlled by an individual or individuals entrusted with maintaining order and focus in the group. Thus women-centered groups whose moderators place restrictions on the number or nature of messages that can be posted, particularly when contentious (challenging, insulting, etc.) messages are discouraged, tend to flourish, with large, active memberships and widespread participation (Camp 1996; Korenman and Wyatt 1996). Female students also participate more - sometimes more than male students - in on-line classrooms in which the teacher controls the interaction, even when the teacher is male (Herring and Nix 1997; Herring 1999).

Moreover, an inherent tension exists between the conventionally masculine value on agonism and the conventionally feminine value on social harmony. The contentiousness of male messages tends to discourage women from participating, while women's concern with politeness tends to be perceived as a "waste of bandwidth" by men (Herring 1996a), or worse yet, as censorship (Grossman 1997; cf. Herring 1999). This tension does not inherently favor one gender over the other - each value system potentially constrains the other. In Internet discussion groups, however, where civil libertarian values have traditionally constituted the dominant ideological context, and where few structures are in place to sanction anti-social behavior, aggression tends to prevail over less aggressive behaviors. In a number of documented cases, repeated aggression from disruptive males has forced women-centered on-line forums to disband, move elsewhere, and/or reconfigure themselves with strict rules and regulations regarding acceptable participant conduct (Collins-Jarvis 1997; Ebben 1994; Reid 1994).

The Purpose of the Study

Many variables may moderate the relationship between gender and CMC. Dramatic differences in context certainly may obscure or speciously highlight results. The context of Internet discussion groups and weblogs is one in which membership is usually large, members probably do not know all others in the group (especially if there are a large number of "lurkers", i.e. members who read messages but do not write responses and therefore are not visible in the text-based discussion), and the task is not to produce a specific result, but rather to generate ideas and discuss them. This paper is to investigate stereotypes about on-line gender styles in Iranian English weblogs. It is hypothesized that men and women use different social and linguistic styles in on-line

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weblogs. They use different patterns of politeness or hedges, for example, which are two of several patterns of communication leading to gender dominance.

Research Questions

1. Do Iranian men and women use different distinctive styles in their computer mediated communication (CMC)?
2. Do these styles vary according to different age groups?

Methodology

To gather enough data, the researchers, quantitatively analyzed a number of English weblogs written by Iranians, a directory of which is available in appendix. 25 percent of all these blogs were managed by females and the other blogs were run by males. Both males and females interacted with each other in all blogs in English written form. All parts of the weblogs were probed, but one of the most interesting part for the researchers was the 'comment' part of the blogs in which every body, male/female or young/adult, was able to express his/her own opinion. Blogs were selected for analysis because they provide a rich sample of the ways in which language and gender interact. This interaction can help us determine power relationship between male and female in the Internet.

It is important to note that claims made in this study are based on findings from Iranian English web logs, i.e. no Persian blogs were addressed for analyses. In addition, the users' Islamic Iranian socialization and education probably influence their English production because English is their second language and it is to some extent influenced by their first language, too. The major factors which were probed here were only 'gender effect' and 'two age groups: teenagers & adults'. All the other factors, like the purpose of the communication; the social class of the participants; the communicative needs of the interactions; and the on-line enforced regulations of the blogs, were controlled in the present study. For ethical purposes, only publically displayed messages were analyzed. In order to be more precise, the researchers only focused on three language features- hedge, tag question, and harsh command.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data in this study, the researchers made use of frequency counts. Frequency counts were used to show the frequency of 'hedges', 'tag questions' and

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'harsh comments' as found in the English utterances produced by Iranian males and females in two age groups namely 13-20 & 25- 37. Also, the researchers took advantage of percentage figures to show the distribution of each linguistic item within groups.

Findings and Results

Results of analysis of data will be presented in two parts. In the first part, comparisons are made between males and females in 13 to 20-year- olds and in the second part between males and females in 25 to 37- year-olds.

Table 1. The result of comparisons between males and females in 25 to 37-year- olds

	Female	Male
Hedge	68%	32%
Tag question	56%	44%
Harsh command	24%	76%

Table 2. The result of comparisons between males and females in 13 to 20-year- olds

	Female	Male
Hedge	51%	49%
Tag question	53%	47%
Harsh command	48%	52%

The results indicated that the use of the so-called gender -dependant features as 'hedges', 'tag questions' mostly attributed to female language and 'harsh comments' mostly attributed to male language has been resistant to change among higher age group even in computer mediated communication, namely weblog communication. However, we witness a remarkable change on use of aforementioned features in language of teens. This may be the harbinger of a modification in the use of language as a tool of dominance in the next generation.

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The above only scratches the surface of what we still need to learn about gender differences in speech production and communication. Farris (1991:201) aptly states that cultural stereotypes play a crucial role in developing and maintaining gender differences, and that speech stereotypes in particular serve to characterize the way that native speakers perceive how men and women normally speak. These stereotypes reinforce what is expected of speakers and the roles they play in society. Much is yet unclear as to the degree to which speech stereotypes reflect actual language use, and to what extent the two diverge. We also do not have a clear idea of what cultural differences may exist with respect to how well stereotypes accurately reflect gender differences in language use. I suspect that there may be stronger pressure in the environment for individuals to conform to social expectations, such that stereotypical behavior as cultural norms may dictate language behavior to a greater extent in Iranian society than in western, English speaking countries.

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Appendix

A directory of English blogs written by Iranians

■ a glinting glimpse from above the wall ■ A journalist from Iran ■
Adventures of Mr. Behi ■ Bingala ■ Brooding Persian ■ Carry me ■ Chackavak ■ Chiz
Burger ■
Cyber Architect ■ Damn ■ DDMMYYYY ■ Designest ■ Editor: Not myself ■ Eloy ■
Eyes Wide Shut ■ Faith Today ■ Forbidden ■ Geek Style ■ Gloria ■ H. Aghvami's
Weblog ■
How I learned to stop worrying and write the blog ■ I am an Iranian daughter ■
I Learn English ■ Inside exploration ■ Inside Iran ■ Interesting and Odd ■ Iran News
Blog ■
Iran Votes 2005 ■ Iranian Diaries ■ Iranian girl ■ Iranian Teacher ■ Iranian Teacher
XP ■ Iran Visitor ■ Kaveh, observations of Tehran life ■ Lady L ■ Lost for
words ■ Maktoob ■
Mani on Wordpress ■ Mansour Nasiri's Photoblog ■ Maziar Online Activities ■

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Me Myself and Ehsan■ Melancholy Man■ Mirage■ My Lucid Dreams■ My Stories■ Narges■
Nima Mofid■ observations of Tehran life■ online time■ Out on the Loom■
Personal Opinion■ Planet Rodmania■ Plate■ Play Next■ Reporter:Myself■ Scarecrew■
Scientific Methods■ SleepWalker■ Sleepwalker Eye■ So What you think?■
Society & Economy■ Stranger in Iran■ SudiVerse■ Swallow■
Sweet Hallucinations Of A Psycho■ Tech Guru■ Tehran online■ Tehran Pacer■
Tehran Post■ Tehran Post■ The Biggest Step■ The Land of persia■ The Lonely Rave■
The Lonely Shepherd■ The Minority Report■ The Remains of the Day■
The seven towns of love■ This is not a blog■ Thoughts and Ideas■ To Cross The Styx■
To Write or Not To Write■ Under Underground■ Ve Ri Tas■ View from Iran■
Words are never enough■ Z-LOGS■ ZiZi Daily

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