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Gender-based language use:

Understanding when, how, and why men and women communicate similarly and differently

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Television media such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *20/20* (e.g., Winfrey, 2008a, 2008b; Stossel, 2006a; Stossel & Deutsch, 2006), websites like Wikipedia and news-related blogs (e.g., “Gender Differences—Communication,” 2008; Shellenbarger, 2008), radio talk shows (e.g., Chatzky, 2008), highly circulated newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (e.g., Kornblut, 2008; Tierney, 2007), popular-press books (e.g., Brizendine, 2006; Gray, 1992; Stossel, 2006b; Tannen, 1990), and other widely available sources of information propagate the notion that men and women are substantially different in the ways they communicate. For example, women are more emotional than men, whereas men are more direct and succinct than women. Some people go so far to assert that men and women are from different planets with different languages (Chatzky; Gray; Shellenbarger; Tannen). This Mars-Venus account focuses on main effect differences claiming that men tend to use certain language features more than women and vice versa in virtually most, if not all, situations/contexts. The essentialization of gender continues despite surmounting evidence from social scientific data to the contrary (Aries, 1996; Dindia & Canary, 2006; Hyde, 2005, 2006; Leaper & Ayres, 2007; Palomares, 2004, 2008, in press; Palomares & Lee, in press).

This chapter presents an argument that is fundamentally at odds with a communication dichotomy between men and women (Gray, 1992; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990) because the language styles of men and women are more dynamic and inconsistent than they are static and stable (Palomares, Reid, & Bradac, 2004). Linguistic similarities maintain an equal rank with linguistic differences because many contextual factors over and above gender can impact the language of men and women (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). For example, status (O’Neill & Colley, 2006; Palomares, in press), age (O’Kearney & Dadds, 2004), the topic (Janssen & Murachver, 2004; Thomson, 2006; Palomares, in press), the setting/situation (Goldshmidt & Weller, 2000), sex-composition (Savicki & Kelley, 2000; Palomares, 2008, in press), the language style of one’s

conversation partner (Hogg, 1985; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001), and the communication mode (Fox, Bukatko, Hallahan, & Crawford, 2007) impact language just as much as, if not more than, gender; also, some of these extra-gender variables seem to exacerbate, diminish, erase, or even flip language differences between men and women. To support this language-is-dynamic argument the chapter details a theory that accounts for what language differences, *if any*, will emerge, when, and why. Specifically, self-categorization theory answers these questions via the explanatory mechanism of gender identity salience (Palomares, 2004, 2008, in press; Palomares et al., 2004; Reid, Keerie, & Palomares, 2003). How men and women communicate is explainable and predictable, in other words, given the contextually relevant social dimensions of gender. This rationale accounts for the particular differences *and* similarities in language that emerge and the circumstances of and reasons for their manifestation. First however, language and gender is described, and its examination is justified.

What Constitutes Gender-Based Language Use?

Generally, two main classes of gender-based language features exist (Leaper & Ayres, 2007; Palomares, 2008). One category is primarily masculine (e.g., agentic, assertive), whereas the other is primarily feminine (e.g., affiliative, communal). In the first category, specific language forms include (but are not limited to): directives or commands (Mulac, 2006), tentativeness or assertiveness (Carli, 1990; Palomares; Reid et al., 2003), giving information (Pillon, Degauquier, & Duquesne, 1992), suggestions (Davis & Gilbert, 1989), criticisms (Sayers & Baucom, 1991), disagreement (Pillon et al.), and other types of agentic speech. According to traditional stereotypes, for example, men use less tentative language, more directives, and more criticisms than women. The language features in the feminine category include (non-exhaustively): agreements (Stiles, Walz, Schroeder, Williams, & Ickes, 1996), supportive and

praising language (Sayers & Baucom), understanding comments (Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995), acknowledgements (Stiles et al.), emotional language (Mulac; Palomares), apologies (Herring, 1993; Lakoff, 1975), and other forms of affiliative talk. Women are stereotypically more emotional, supportive, and understanding than men. Arguably, other classes of language are considered relevant to gender, such as talkativeness (Leaper & Ayres), but affiliative and assertive forms are the most broad and commonly invoked forms.

Why Study Gender-Based Language Use?

The simple answer to the question of why gender-based language is worthy of empirical and theoretical scrutiny is that it is consequential. More specifically, there are at least two ways in which outcomes can manifest. One way is in terms of social influence. Tentativeness is beneficial for women attempting to influence men (Carli, 1990; Reid et al., 2003; Reid, Palomares, Anderson, & Bondad-Brown, in press): Under certain conditions, tentative women are more likely to persuade men on certain issues than are direct women. Tentative language, however, does not have a similar boost for men's influence with others nor for women's influence with women. Second, gender-based language affects impression formation. A person evaluates and infers the beliefs of others when interacting with them based on the linguistic features they employ (Bradac, 1990; Ng & Bradac, 1993). The language someone uses, in other words, plays a direct role in how others judge or rate that person along a variety of dimensions. Specifically, tentativeness yields low assessments in a communicator's confidence, power, competence, and intelligence compared to someone who is direct (Carli, 1990; Ng & Bradac, 1993). Also, individuals who use language features typically associated with women are judged relatively high in aesthetic quality (e.g., pleasant, beautiful, sweet, nice) and sociointellectual status (e.g., high social status, white collar, literate, rich), whereas people using language features commonly associated with men are judged relatively high in dynamism (e.g., strong, active,

loud, aggressive; Mulac, 2006). For example, references to emotion are positively correlated with ratings of aesthetic quality and sociointellectual status and negatively associated with dynamism even when the raters are unaware of communicators' sex (Mulac & Lundell, 1994). Gender-based language produces meaningful outcomes for communicators.

Explaining Gender-Based Language Use

Self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherall, 1987) provides an effective means to explain and predict gender-based language use. Rooted in a social identity framework (Tajfel, 1978), the theory focuses on the social-cognitive basis of identity and how a self-definition is rooted in collective affiliations and changes depending on the context. Self-categorization theory offers a general explanation for different behaviors; yet, it has been applied to gender-based language often (e.g., Palomares, 2004, 2008; Palomares et al., 2004; Reid et al., 2003). The theory makes distinctions among inter-individual, intragroup, and intergroup self-categorizations and focuses on the intergroup nature of social interaction. When interacting in inter-individual terms, gender is irrelevant to one's self-definition because the focus is on idiosyncratic differences between unique people (e.g., me versus you). Intragroup self-construals highlight two people of the same group (e.g., me and you as men). However, if a self-categorization is based in intergroup terms of gender (i.e., me, as a man, versus you, as a woman), then gender memberships are germane for people during interaction. Whenever a self-definition refers to one's gender, then gender is salient (i.e., activated or operating cognitively). *Gender salience* is a cognitive state wherein someone explicitly or implicitly self-defines as a member of their collective gender group. A man whose gender is salient, for example, would self-categorize as being a man which would result in a cognitively activated gender identity. The theory emphasizes the intergroup nature of interaction and explains what social identity people are most likely to internalize in any given context and the ensuing attitudes, beliefs, and

behavior.

What self-definition is triggered—and, in particular, if gender is salient—depends on an interaction among three factors (Oakes, 1987). *Accessibility*, or perceiver readiness, is the extent to which individuals have a propensity to self-define in terms of a social category; it can manifest in the form of individuals' past experiences, motivation, task at hand or other personal factors. *Comparative fit* is the extent to which people perceive intergroup, compared to intragroup, differences: The more the intergroup differences outweigh any intragroup ones, the more likely the associated social identity will become salient. *Normative fit* is the extent to which the perceived intergroup differences and intragroup similarities are socially meaningful and correspond to the collective norms within and between groups. Together, these three factors predict that individuals will self-define using an accessible gender if they perceive applicable differences between men and women, and gender is more likely to become salient if this comparative information is normatively consistent with gender stereotypes. Because this process is primarily psychological, one might construe an interaction in terms of gender (e.g., men versus women) even if logically relevant cues are not objectively present.

The theory not only explains what social identity, if any, will become salient in a context but also the consequences of people's cognitions being filtered through a salient social identity. This process, referred to as *depersonalization*, creates a situation wherein people assimilate to the ingroup norm or prototype (Hogg & Reid, 2006). *Prototypes* are contextually dependent fuzzy sets of attributes that establish a means to differentiate social groups. A prototype can be composed of beliefs, appearances, attitudes, characteristics, and/or other attributes that maximize intergroup differences and intragroup similarities. When an identity is salient, people conform to the prototypical attribute(s) that defines the groups. Thus, if gender is salient, then men and women will assimilate to their respective ingroup prototypes whatever they may be (Palomares

et al., 2004). Under some conditions, for example, two attributes—*affiliative* (e.g., women are communal, empathic, caring, etc.; whereas men are relatively unaffiliative) and *assertiveness* (e.g., men are dominant, agentic, strong, etc.; whereas women are unassertive)—could equally define the gender salience prototype. In this first instance, the language of men and women would correspond to these two dimensions because the prototype is related to the two different classes of linguistic variables: For example, women would reference emotions more than men, whereas men would use more directives than women. If, on the other hand, the prototype of gender salience focuses only on women being affiliative (and not unassertive), then women would increase their use of language consistent with that prototype (e.g., women use more references to emotion than men); however, men and women would use similar levels of assertive language because the affiliative prototype is irrelevant to those language features. A third option is for gender salience to employ only an assertiveness prototype thereby yielding men more linguistically dominant than women; but affiliative speech would be equal for men and women because the attendant attribute is not evoked via the prototype. A fourth manifestation of the prototype that stresses bipolar opinions between men and women would lead to similar language for men and women because the prototype is unrelated to gender-based language. Of course, other manifestations for the prototype are possible; and if gender is not salient, then no gender-based language differences would be present. Hence, knowing whether gender is salient is useful, but knowing *how* it is salient (i.e., the prototype) is more effective. Identifying the gender salience prototype affords the ability to generate nuanced predictions in what differences, if any, will emerge and the nature of those differences. In other words, the language of men and women will reflect the inter-gender dynamics as reified in the prototype of gender salience.

For the first three examples of the gender salience prototype detailed in the previous paragraph, language was at least partly consistent with gender stereotypes on the whole. A self-

categorization explanation, however, also allows for gender-based language to be inconsistent with traditional expectations (Palomares et al., 2004; see also Palomares, in press). That is, because the prototype of gender salience can oppose stereotypes, gender-based language differences can be counter-stereotypical. For example, if the gender salience prototype emerges with women being dominant or more agentic than men, then men should be more tentative than women. Likewise, if gender salience instead (or also) yields an affiliative prototype with men more communal than women, then men should use more references to emotion than women. An array of predictions consequently emerges depending on the attribute(s) that defines the prototype of a salient gender identity. Specifically, when gender is salient, alterations in its prototype can affect the extent and character of any differences present in men's and women's language. If gender is not salient, then language should be similar.

Empirically Validating Self-Categorization Theory's Account

To make precise predictions about how men and women use affiliative and assertive language when gender is salient, information about the prototype of gender salience must be determined (Palomares et al., 2004). Much research suggests that when the prototype of gender salience focuses on stereotypical differences between men and women (e.g., women more affiliative than men, and men more assertive than women) traditional language differences emerge. For example, Reid et al. (2003) showed that in a cooperative intergroup interaction between men and women, women used more tentative language than men *only* if gender was salient. Also, Palomares (2004) confirmed that women used more references to emotion than men but again *only* if gender was salient. Whereas these two studies manipulated gender salience, they did not directly account for, nor induce, the prototype of gender salience.

Two subsequent studies, however, directly manipulated the prototype of gender salience. The first study randomly assigned people to be in one of two conditions: high gender salience

with a type of affiliative prototype (i.e., women are more supportive than men) or low gender salience (Palomares, 2008). Specifically, participants read a paragraph that manipulated gender salience under the cover story that the paragraph would give them and an ostensible e-mail partner something to discuss during their e-mail exchange. Next, participants read and replied to a bogus e-mail from their partner who was either a man or a woman named John or Jennifer respectively. E-mail messages were coded for both references to emotion (a language feature related to the affiliation prototype) and tentative language (a feature irrelevant to affiliation). Data revealed that women referenced emotion more than men only in the high gender salience condition and that they were equally tentative across all conditions. Results were consistent with the theory: Because gender salience had the affiliative prototype, gender-based language differences emerged for references to emotion only. Moreover, the sex composition of the e-mail dyad moderated this effect: Women referenced emotion more than men in the high salience condition particularly when women sent an e-mail to a male partner. Thus, language differences reflect the prototype of a salient gender especially in inter-group interactions because the mixed-sex composition enhanced the differences in the affiliative prototype more than the intragroup context did.

The second study sought to conceptually replicate and extend the first one by employing an agentic prototype (i.e., expertise) in stead of an affiliative prototype and again using both tentative language and references to emotion (Palomares, in press). The experiment manipulated this prototype via the topic of an e-mail exchange: masculine (e.g., sports), feminine (e.g., fashion), or gender-neutral (e.g., places to eat) topics. Specifically, participants were asked to send an e-mail to an ostensible male or female partner on one of the randomly assigned topics. Given the topics and their implications for gender differences in expertise (i.e., men know more about masculine topics, women know more about feminine topics, and they are equally

knowledgeable about gender-neutral topics), this study also sought to more broadly illustrate the dynamic nature of gender-based language by showing traditional differences in addition to counter-stereotypical and no differences in tentative language. Because the masculine topics privileged the expertise of men over women, traditional gender differences emerged (i.e., women were more tentative than men) for that topic. The opposite pattern (i.e., men were more tentative than women) was verified for the feminine topics because the topics privileged women over men. Last, the gender-neutral topic yielded no language differences, and references to emotion did not vary in similar ways across the topics because emotion was irrelevant to the agentic prototype. Similar to the first study, these effects were particularly pronounced in intergroup (i.e., mixed-sex) e-mail exchanges but not intragroup (i.e., same-sex) dyads. As a final testament to the explanatory power of self-categorization theory, gender salience mediated the effects of topic on tentative language but only in intergroup interactions.

These studies explained, predicted, and demonstrated a diverse array of patterns for how men and women use gender-based language depending on the salience of gender, its prototype, and the intra/intergroup nature of the interaction. Of course, because other variables (e.g., avatars or electronic graphical self-representations) are antecedent to gender salience (Palomares & Lee, *in press*) and other variables (e.g., gender schematicity) can interact with salience (Palomares, 2004), future research needs to elaborate on these effects and look into other ways in which gender-based language is sensitive to contextual dynamics. Specifically, future research will seek to uncover moderators of this process and compare the gender salience explanation with other accounts. Nonetheless, gender-based language use generally reflects the situationally unique construal of inter-gender relations. If gender is superfluous in an interaction, then language differences are unlikely to emerge between men and women; but if gender plays a meaningful role in an interaction (i.e., gender is salient), then language should reflect this role when

applicable in ways specified by the attributes that compose the prototype of gender salience. That is, when the prototype of gender salience is somehow associated with gender-based language, language should mold to and reflect this connection. One, therefore, should not expect stereotypical language differences *ipso facto*. More accurately, gender-based language is dynamic and taking into account the level of gender salience and its prototype is paramount.

Retrospectively Explaining Extant Research

The language and gender literature abounds with inconsistencies (Aries, 1996). Some studies, for example, found gender difference in tentativeness (e.g., Carli, 1990), whereas others did not (e.g., Brouwer, Gerritsen, & De Haan, 1979; Crosby & Nyquist, 1977). Sex composition also impacted language in one study (Colley et al., 2004), whereas it had no impact in another (Thomson et al., 2001). Moreover, many publications simply underline bifurcated differences between men and women and ignore the contextually sensitive nuances of how men and women actually use language across multiple situations (e.g., Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1990) even though meta-analyses show the importance of moderator variables (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). Relatedly, extant research shows that men and women can simultaneously use certain language features differently while employing other features similarly. For example, in one study of same-sex dyadic e-mails with participant-determined topics, women referenced emotion more than men; but similar levels of questions and oppositions emerged (Thomson & Murachver, 2001). Another study that examined men and women criticizing in a face-to-face organizational setting showed a markedly different pattern: Men used more reference to emotion, oppositions, and questions than women, but they used similar levels of “I” references (Mulac, Seibold, & Farris, 2000). In a third study of mixed- and same-sex electronic discussion groups trying to reach consensus on the moral values in a “lovers scenario,” women used more “I” references than men, but they used questions similarly (Savicki & Kelley, 2000). In fact, the language and gender literature is

muddle with stereotypical differences, no differences, and even counter-stereotypical differences but mostly offers virtually no theoretical account for the diverse array of findings.

Why myriad discrepancies exist seems difficult to rectify especially post hoc, but the explanatory mechanism in self-categorization theory might throw light on the emergence of differences and/or similarities across a variety of language forms in particular contexts. For example, an explanation for the inconsistencies across the last three studies in the previous paragraph is that they may have inadvertently altered gender salience each with a unique prototype. Evidence that is consistent with this retrospective explanation is not available in the Thomson and Murachver (2001) study because it contains very few details of the e-mail exchanges. Yet, the circumstances for the Mulac et al. (2000) study likely prevented gender from becoming salient because the participants held superordinate positions in organizations. As the authors state, apparently “both women and men understand that their positions of leadership in the organization require that they offset [gender] stereotypical expectations in their criticism of coworkers” (Mulac et al., p. 409). In other words, traditional gender-based language did not materialize because of the organizational roles and context. Further, because the “lovers scenario” that Savicki and Kelley (2000) used “emphasized emotional and relational aspects of the characters and had a ‘soap opera’ quality that might be more appealing to women” (p. 821) gender salience may have been heightened with a prototype that encouraged women to use more “I” references than men. That is, women may have found the “lovers scenario” more personally relevant than men which was reflected in their language. Clearly, at least two of the studies contained exceptionally different circumstances for participants which may have lead to disparate levels of gender salience with unique prototypes. In fact, self-categorization theory suggests that certain aspects of an interaction can have significantly different impacts on gender salience and its prototype (Palomares, 2008, in press; Palomares et al., 2004).

Extant research, therefore, might be reassessed in terms of gender salience so that ostensible inconsistencies are actually deemed rational variations. Thomson (2006, Study 2), for example, found virtually no language differences between men and women when examining same-sex four-person groups discussing masculine and feminine topics, which was not surprising considering that the interactions were intragroup. Likewise, Janssen and Murachver (2004) found no gender-based language differences, which is again understandable because they solicited language in written prose without a recipient. Both studies, however, found a significant main effect for topic: Stereotypical-male language was more likely in masculine topics than feminine topics, whereas the reverse was true for stereotypical-female language. In fact, even though gender salience was not measured in either study, it was likely low in both because it was not induced either directly via a manipulation or unintentionally via the circumstances of the studies.

Thus, the topic can seemingly have a direct effect on language features that are traditionally associated with gender, and this effect can occur without gender being salient. More broadly, instances where language appears to be gender-based could actually be cases of people using language that is appropriate for the context at hand rather than people using language because of an active prototype of gender salience. That is, men and women alike can readily use language typically considered masculine or feminine due to situational forces devoid of any influence from gender. For example, in a hypothetical conversation between two people in an employer-employee relationship, the lower status employee may use more tentative language than the higher status employer. This language pattern would likely be the result of their organizational roles and concomitant status and not gender, even if the employer happened to be male and the employee was female. Stated differently, the roles might create an ostensible gender difference in language when it is actually a role difference (which might be how some stereotypes about gender-based language emerged in the first place and are propagated; cf. Eagly

& Koenig, 2006). In this example, role-based language difference would persist even if the gender of the interlocutors was swapped (i.e., female employer and male employee). Moreover, gender salience would likely be unrelated (nor serve as a mediator) to language as tentativeness would be role-governed with no basis in gender. In contrast, the effects of the research presented in the previous section were clearly gender-based. Future research might evaluate role effects and other contextual factors against gender effects.

Conclusion

Self-categorization theory provides a sophisticated account of how men and women use language. To date the theory has generally garnered support. Thus, future language and gender research should continue to focus on the prototype of gender salience, as well as the intra/intergroup nature and other features of an interaction. Doing so will continue to provide strong evidence to reject a cosmological characterization of gender-based language (i.e., men are from Venus, and women are from Mars) that many popular information sources erroneously hype (e.g., Gray, 1992); indeed, replacing it with a more accurate metaphor is prudent: Men and women are from different blocks in the same neighborhood, and they move frequently. In other words, gender-based language differences tend to be relatively small and dynamically sensitive to the context. Advancing this line of inquiry will broaden the understanding of when, how, and why men and women communicate similarly *and* differently.

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