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ABSTRACT

A study explored the social acceptability that accompanies the expression of sexual slang. The study of gender differences in language use is nothing new. Previous research has indicated that men and women differ in their use of tentative language, topic selection, control techniques, and conversational style. However, this research has examined differences due to male and female biological sex, and has not examined differences due to psychological gender. Subjects, 49 male and 92 female undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory communication course at a large midwestern university, completed the Social Acceptability of Language Scale and the Bem Sex-Role Inventory. Results indicated that, for the most part, neither biological sex nor psychological gender accounted for differences in the social acceptability of sexual slang. Findings suggest that men and women are moving toward a universal use of sexual slang. (Contains 48 references and 1 table of data.) (Author/RS)

The Social Acceptability of Sexual Slang: Functions of Biological Sex and Psychological Gender

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Abstract

The study of gender differences in language use is nothing new. Previous research has indicated that men and women differ in their use of tentative language, topic selection, control techniques, and conversational style. However, this research has examined differences due to male and female biological sex, and has not examined differences due to psychological gender. This paper explored the social acceptability that accompanies the expression of sexual slang. For the most part, we found that neither biological sex nor psychological gender account for differences in the social acceptability of sexual slang.

The Social Acceptability of Sexual Slang: Functions of Biological Sex and Psychological Gender

Introduction

The study of gender differences in language use is nothing new. Previous research has indicated that men and women differ in their use of tentative language (Bradley, 1981; Carli, 1990; Mulac, Lundell, & Bradac, 1986; Wright & Hosman, 1983); topic selection (Kipers, 1987); control techniques (Austin, Salehi, & Leffler, 1987; Zimmerman & West, 1975); and conversational style (Cook, Fritz, McCornack, & Visperas, 1985; Haas, 1979; Mulac et al., 1986; Thorne & Henley, 1975). However, this research has examined differences based on male and female biological sex, and has not examined differences that emerge due to psychological gender.

Yet, interest does exist in identifying patterns of speech that reflect the psychological constructs of masculinity or femininity (Smythe, 1991). This interest suggests that sex-role appropriateness is present within the use of language. For example, Berryman-Fink and Wilcox (1983) found that a communicator who uses "male" language features is considered extroverted whereas a speaker who uses "female" language features is considered more credible. Rasmussen and Moely (1986) concluded that speakers using "male" language are considered less socially positive than speakers using "female" language. These findings suggest that perceptual differences lie in the social acceptability of language.

This paper will explore the social acceptability of language, with a specific focus on the use of sexual slang. Slang words refer to language commonly used by particular classes, social groups, or age groups (Pei & Gaynor, 1954). Sexual slang was chosen for two reasons. First, the literature suggests that biological sex differences exist in the use of such words. Second, the use of slang words implies a high level of confidence and this confidence is typically attributed to "male" language in our society (deKlerk, 1990). If this is the case, then differences in language use between both biological sex and psychological gender of the speaker should emerge.

Review of Literature

Biological Sex Differences in Language Use

Biological sex differences in sexual language is an area of research that has been supported empirically. Research indicates that men and women differ in their usage of sexual slang (deKlerk, 1990); name-calling (Phillips, 1990; Preston & Stanley, 1987); sexual graffiti (Arluke, Kutakoff, & Lovin, 1987); terms for sexual intercourse (Kutner & Brogan, 1974; Walsh & Leonard, 1974); and sexual expletives (Bailey & Timm, 1976; Jay, 1980; Staley, 1978). In most cases, men are not only given more latitude in their language usage, but the usage is deemed more socially acceptable. deKlerk (1990) reported that slang uttered by teenage men is the most acceptable group. Conversely, female

adults is the group in which the expression of slang is not only viewed as unacceptable, but strongly discouraged. Furthermore, certain terms (e.g, fuck, cunt, and prick) have been rated by both men and women as being more appropriate for use by men (Johnson & Fine, 1985).

Differences also emerge in the use of obscenity and sexual vocabulary. Men are more inclined than women to use obscenity (Fine & Johnson, 1984; Selnow, 1985), which is couched in the form of sexual slang. Cortese and Myers (1995) found that not only do men and women attribute the use of obscene terms to a particular biological sex, but the terms are used to refer to either a man or a woman. For example, the use of the term whore is attributed to men (by both men and women) and the term is never used (by either sex) to refer to a man (Cortese & Myers, 1995). Moreover, men engage in the use of obscenity at an earlier age than women (Fine & Johnson, 1984).

A series of studies (e.g., Sanders, 1978; Sanders & Robinson, 1979; Simkins & Rinck, 1982) have detected that men and women employ different terminology when discussing male genitalia, female genitalia, and the act of copulation. In formal interpersonal contexts, participants preferred to use formal terms (i.e., penis, vagina, sex). In less formal situations, respondents reported using slang or colloquial terms.

More recent studies have indicated that the use of slang terminology is rising at a steady rate (Myers, 1992, 1994; Wells, 1989, 1990). In some instances, normative vocabulary usage by biological sex is being discarded in favor of terms that are more easily identifiable and universal to both sexes (Myers, 1994). For instance, the term dick was once used exclusively by men in conversation with other men (Sanders & Robinson, 1979). Today, the term is used by both men and women in conversation with one another (Myers, 1994). This finding is an indication that social acceptability may be couched within the use of certain slang words. By using slang rather than colloquial or formal words, the person is more likely to engage in conversation and to be accepted into the conversation (Feezel & Myers, 1993).

Thus, it appears that diversity in language usage exists between biological sex. However, a variable that may affect language is the psychological gender of the individual (Smythe, 1991). Bem (1974) posited that the sex-typing of an individual may limit his or her behavioral choices, which will then be reflected in language choice.

Psychological Gender Differences in Language Use

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, 1974) has become a key instrument in assessing an individual's gender orientation. Bem created the scale in an attempt to better understand the concept of psychological androgyny, which is described as the presence of both masculine and feminine traits within the same individual (Bem, 1977).

Bem (1981) has argued that the BSRI is rooted within Gender Schema Theory, which assumes that individuals organize and process information based on gender orientation. She found that

sex-typed people are more ready to process information using gender schema than cross-sex-typed, androgynous, or undifferentiated people. Based on this conclusion, it appears that the BSRI would be a viable instrument for the study of language and recall.

Researchers have used the BSRI to test language usage and recall. Sniezek and Jazwinski (1986) used the BSRI to study the use of generic terms. They found that words that were thought to apply to both men and women seemed to apply solely to men; therefore, gender ambiguity seemed to be a problem. Renn and Calvert (1993) studied gender orientation and memory. They found that gender-aschematic people (those who do not base their self-concept on gender stereotypes) remembered more counterstereotypical information than gender-schematic people (those who base their self-concept on gender stereotypes). Also, androgynous and undifferentiated people had the most accurate memories for counterstereotypical information. However, all groups were equal in their memory of traditionally stereotyped information.

In a similar study, Krake (1989) studied the link between gender schemata and memory. She reported that feminine schematics remembered feminine words best, and androgynous subjects remembered masculine and feminine words equally better than neutral words. She was unable to draw conclusions about undifferentiated and masculine subjects and therefore concluded that there is not a clear link between sex-role orientation and memory.

Rationale

Thus, the assumption can be made that language differences based on the biological sex and psychological gender of the speaker do indeed exist. Research has indicated that males are more likely to assign nicknames, use more sexually explicit words, have a more extensive sexual vocabulary, use more slang terminology, and engage in a greater use of profanity. In addition, men and women are evaluated and labeled differently when they use sexual terminology (deKlerk, 1990). Consequently, an examination of the social acceptability that accompanies the expression of sexual slang is needed. The following two research questions are posited:

RQ1 Does biological sex account for differences in the social acceptability of sexual slang?

RQ2 Does psychological gender account for differences in the social acceptability of sexual slang?

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 141 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory communication course at a large midwestern university. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in

the study, but received a research point necessary for the successful completion of the course.

Forty-nine (n = 49) male and 92 female students participated in the study. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 53 years (M = 19.75, SD = 4.13). The majority of the participants reported their class standing at the freshman level (n = 81, or 57%).

Procedures and Instrumentation

Each participant completed (a) the Social Acceptability of Language Scale and (b) the Bem Sex-Role Inventory. All participants were informed that their responses would be kept anonymous.

Social Acceptability of Language scale. The Social Acceptability of Language scale (Feezel, 1992) is a 10-item instrument that consists of two factors. The first factor measures vividness (i.e., strength) of language using five pairs of adjectives: active-passive, colorless-colorful, vivid-dull, boring-interesting, and strong-weak. The second factor measures the social acceptability of language using five pairs of adjectives: dirty-clean, unacceptable-acceptable, vulgar-refined, disrespectful-respectful, and tasteful-tasteless. Each pair of adjectives is measured using a seven-point semantic differential scale.

In a study of the social acceptability of sex words, Feezel and Myers (1993) reported subscale coefficient alphas ranging from .67 to .95 (vividness and acceptability factors for each term). Reliability for the 10-item scale was assessed at .89 (M = 342.83, SD = 45.06).

In this study, respondents rated the social acceptability of terms used to refer to an undesirable man and an undesirable woman in a mixed-age, mixed-sex setting. The ten terms were generated by previous research which asked respondents to supply the terms most frequently used (Myers, 1992). Terms were dickhead, asshole, dick, bastard, and jerk for the undesirable man; terms were bitch, whore, slut, cunt, and ho for the undesirable woman. Respondents were provided with an example, using the word tramp.

Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). The BSRI (Bem, 1974) is a self-descriptive measure which consists of three scales: a 20-item Masculinity scale, a 20-item Femininity scale, and a 20-item Social Desirability scale. Respondents are asked to rate each item as to how well it describes themselves. Responses are generated on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from always or almost always true (7) to never or almost never true (1).

A median-split of the items is used to classify respondents into one of four categories: (a) masculine (high masculinity score and low femininity score); (b) feminine (low masculinity score and high femininity score); (c) androgynous (high masculinity and femininity scores); or (d) undifferentiated (low masculinity and femininity scores) (Bem, 1974; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). In this study, 38 respondents were classified as masculine, 41 respondents were classified as feminine, 34

respondents were classified as androgynous, and 28 respondents were classified as undifferentiated.

Previous research has yielded coefficient alphas of .86 on the masculinity scale and .80 and .82 on the femininity scale (Bem, 1974). In this study, coefficient alphas of .84 and .79 were reported for the masculinity and the femininity scales, respectively. Reliability for the 60-item scale was assessed at .82 (M = 291.92, SD = 24.48). Validity of the instrument has been confirmed by Gaudreau (1977), Schmitt and Millard (1988), and Taylor (1984).

Data Analysis

Research question one was answered using a series of t-tests. Research question two was answered using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Separate analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted on each of the ten terms. Significant findings were subjected to Tukey post-hoc t-tests.

Results

Research question one inquired whether biological sex accounts for differences in the social acceptability of sexual slang. T-tests conducted on each of the ten terms revealed no significant differences, with the exception of the term bastard, $t(139) = 3.796$, $p < .001$. Men (M = 37.12, SD = 4.56) rated the terms as being more socially acceptable than women (M = 32.68, SD = 7.49). Biological sex did not account for differences in the social acceptability of the remaining nine terms.

Research question two inquired whether psychological gender accounts for differences in psychological gender. The MANOVA was significant, Wilk's lambda = .72, F (30,376) = 1.47, $p < .05$. Separate univariate analyses (see Table 1) conducted on the ten terms revealed three significant findings: slut (F [3,137] = 3.7, $p < .05$), cunt (F [3,137] = 5.71, $p < .01$), and bastard (F [3,137] = 2.97, $p < .05$). Tukey post-hoc t-tests revealed that masculine-typed individuals rate the social acceptability of slut and bastard higher than feminine-typed and androgynous-typed individuals. The term cunt is rated higher in social acceptability by masculine-typed individuals than the other three gender types.

Discussion

We noted that, for the most part, biological sex differences did not account for any differences in the social acceptability of language. This finding parallels research conducted by Feezel and Myers (1993). They established that biological sex does not appear to affect the social acceptability attached to terms used for "sexual intercourse." In their study, the only distinction between men and women was that men are more likely to prefer slang terminology whereas women are more accepting of euphemistic or romantic love terms. In addition, as a group, respondents rated some terms as highly socially acceptable (e.g., make love, have sex) and others terms as less socially acceptable (e.g., fuck, screw).

A possible explanation for this finding is that gender ambiguity influenced the results. Sniezek and Jazwinski (1986) suggested that individuals use sexual bias in language. They found that words thought to apply to both men and women were assigned only to men. If this sexual bias exists for all four psychological gender types, it could increase the level of social acceptability for sexual slang terms.

The results of this investigation, then, suggest that men and women are moving toward a universal use of sexual slang. This movement has been documented in other studies (Feezel & Myers, 1993; Myers, 1992, 1994). Moreover, Myers (1994) found that in particular contexts, male and female students use the same sexual terminology. Cortese and Myers (1995) discovered that the use of the terms dick, dickhead, and asshole are attributed to both men and women. In this study, those three terms, as well as the terms whore, ho, and jerk, were rated equally as being socially acceptable terms for use by both men and women. Taken together, these findings suggest that certain sexual slang terms may be more socially acceptable than other terms.

However, the realm of psychological gender and the social acceptability of language needs to be further explored. Smythe (1991) noted that research conducted on psychological androgyny has been minimal. In this study, the terms slut, cunt, and bastard were rated as being more socially acceptable by masculine-typed individuals than by the other three gender types. Perhaps these terms are also more acceptable for use by masculine-typed individuals.

There were some limitations which may have contributed to the results gathered in this study. First, the use of a college student sample may have affected the results. It is possible that this group uses sexual slang more frequently than other groups and therefore may view the expression of sexual slang as more acceptable. Second, the Social Acceptability of Language Scale (Feezel, 1992) is a new measure. Although it appears to be a reliable measure, the measure has not been widely used and its validity as a measurement scale has not yet been addressed.

Future research should take three directions. First, research should examine the role that context plays in the use of sexual language (Johnson & Fine, 1985; Liska, 1992). It is likely that numerous variables affect the social acceptability of sexual slang. Previous research has found that variables such as the speaker's sexual orientation (Wells, 1990) or the nature of the relationship between speaker and receiver (Myers, 1994) affects the choice of sexual slang. In most research conducted thus far, contextual variables have not been examined.

Second, terms other than sexual slang should be examined. For example, Preston and Stanley (1987) noted although male and female college students share a similar vocabulary of insults, biological sex of the speaker affects both the choice and the interpretation of the insult. Perhaps the interpretation of the insult is masked in the social acceptability of the term.

Third, other ways of assessing psychological gender may need to be implemented. Stephen and Harrison (1985) noted the Communication Styles Q-Set is capable of producing a more detailed profile of communication behaviors attributed to a particular gender. Using such a measure may provide more insight into the relationship between psychological gender and language studies.

In sum, this paper explored the social acceptability that accompanies the expression of sexual slang. For the most part, we found that neither biological sex nor psychological gender accounts for the differences in the social acceptability of the terms.

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Table 1
Psychological Gender and Social Acceptability

	Means					
Term	1[a]	2[b]	3[c]	4[d]	F	p <
Bitch	34.42	33.44	31.97	33.71	1.45	.23
Dickhead	35.53	33.93	33.27	33.14	1.31	.27
Whore	34.79	31.88	31.74	33.14	2.16	.10
Asshole	34.18	34.05	33.68	34.50	.09	.97
Slut	35.66_{ab}	32.02_{a}	31.77_{b}	34.00	3.70	.01
Dick	35.63	34.73	33.29	33.89	.98	.40
Cunt	34.47_{ab}	29.12_{ac}	30.44_{b}	33.18_{c}	5.71	.01
Bastard	36.71_{ab}	32.90_{a}	32.56_{b}	34.82	2.97	.03
Ho	36.45	33.68	32.79	34.75	2.03	.11
Jerk	40.21	41.37	39.23	40.07	.64	.59

Note. Degrees of freedom are 3,137 for all ten terms. Means sharing subscripts across each row are significant at the .05 level based on Tukey post-hoc t-tests.
[a] n = 38 masculine-typed respondents.
[b] n = 41 feminine-typed respondents.
[c] n = 34 androgynous-typed respondents.
[d] n = 28 undifferentiated respondents.