

## *Gender Differences in the Use of Sentence Type and Sentence Modifiers: An Analysis of Emails by Iraqi Learners of English*

By:

Assistant Lecturer Assistant Lecturer  
Jasim Mohammed Hasan Ahmed Hasan Khammat

Shatt AL – Arab University College

### **Abstract**

With the advancement of technology as a means of communication, there has been a great deal of interest to study e-discourse as a form of language. The present study focuses on the gender differences between Iraqi males and females in the use of sentence type and modifiers in writing emails. The researchers will shed light on these differences through analyzing and studying sixty randomly selected postings which 60 male and female Iraqi students have already sent to the email address of the Department of English at Shat Al Arab University College. The study also aims at analyzing the types of modifiers used by males and how they differ from those females use.

### **ملخص**

مع تطور التكنولوجيا كوسيلة من وسائل الاتصال ظهر الاهتمام بدراسة الخطابة الالكترونية كشكل من أشكال اللغة. و تركز الدراسة الحالية على الاختلافات بين الذكور والإناث العراقيين من حيث استخدام أنواع الجمل ومعرفاتها عند كتابتهم الرسائل الالكترونية. يقوم الباحثان ببيان هذه الاختلافات من خلال تحليل ودراسة ٦٠ رسالة الكترونية تم اختيارها بشكل عشوائي من بين الرسائل التي أرسلها مسبقاً طلاب عراقيون من كلا الجنسين إلى العنوان البريدي لقسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية شط العرب الجامعة. كما وتهدف الدراسة لتحليل أنواع المعارف التي يستخدمها الذكور ومدى اختلافها عن تلك التي تستخدمها الإناث.

## **1. Introduction**

The rapid expansion of Internet technology in the last twenty years has been accompanied by a surge in the amount of literature dedicated to the nature of computer mediated communication and the causes and consequences of Internet use.

The investigation and identification of differences between men's and women's speech date back across time. Until 1944, no specific piece of writing on gender differences in language appeared. It was in 1970s that comparison between female cooperativeness and male competitiveness in linguistic behavior began.

Although men and women, from a given social class, belong to the same speech community, they may use different linguistic forms. The linguistic forms used by women and men contrast to some extent in all speech communities. Less dramatic are communities where men and women speak the same language, but some distinct linguistic features occur in the speech of women and men. These differences range from pronunciation or morphology to vocabulary (Herring, 1994:6).

Differences in the way men and women portray themselves in oral language have been the subject of much debate. Meanwhile, the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) continues to generate interest from sociolinguists who are concerned with whether the traditional gender differences in face-to-face interaction are carried over into online discourse. What has been discussed by many authors is that language used by males and females in CMC reveals gender related differences. Accordingly, the goal of this research is to determine whether the postings by male and female students reveal gender-related distinctions related to the use of sentence type and sentence modifiers.

## **2. Language, Gender, and Computer Mediated Communication**

In the present section, the researchers will present theoretical background on language & gender, computer mediated communication, and gender differences in email communication.

### **2.1 Language and Gender**

Every race, culture, civilization, and society shares two things in common: the presence of both men and women, and the need to communicate between the two. The assertion that men and women communicate in different ways, about different things, and for different reasons seems to go un-argued and is accepted as true by many.

Gender differences in communication are not something that we are born with, they're not due to differences in brain, and they're definitely not due to the two sexes being from different planets. "We are who we are and we communicate how we communicate because it is what society and culture demand of us" (Herring, 1994:3).

There also exist social differences between men and women. Two of the most significant theories on social differences between males and females are "*difference theory*" and "*dominance theory*". Uchida, as cited in Nemati and Bayer, (2007:2), shows that in "difference theory", although men and women live in the same environment they establish different relations with the society as if each belongs to a different environment and culture, the result of which is consequently reflected in the language of both genders. In "*dominance theory*," men and women are believed to inhabit a cultural and linguistic world, where power and status are unequally distributed.

Language, culture and society interact to give members of different genders different levels of power and recognition in society. According to Tannen (1995:138), "communication isn't as simple as saying what you mean. How you say what you mean is crucial and differs from one person to the next because using language is a learned behavior." How we talk and listen is deeply influenced by cultural expectations. She (ibid) illuminates that males and females are taught different linguistic practices in that communicative behaviors are considered acceptable for boys may be considered completely inappropriate for girls. Whereas a boy might be permitted to use rough language, a girl in the same situation might be reminded to use her manners and be lady-like.

The different styles and motives for communication represent different "cultural upbringings", and one is not necessarily better than the other. The basic uses of conversation by women are to establish and support intimacy, i.e. they seek acceptance; while for men it is to gain status. Moreover, men tend to interrupt more and ask questions less (Rossetti, 2000:1).

Corney et al. (2002:2) state that women's language makes more frequent use of emotionally intensive adverbs and adjectives such as and that their language is more punctuated with assertions, apologies, questions and personal orientation and support. On the other hand, language used by male expresses independence and assertions of power.

Moreover, there are gender differences in the non-verbal cues. Most men and women think they are capable of comprehending one another's body language. Since men and women tend to focus more on listening and verbal, non-verbal cues are often ignored. In conversation, women show more emotions. Women smile more and nod their head while speaking and listening. Nodding the head is a sign of understanding and a way to gain acceptance (Tannen, 1995:135).

Baron (2005:5) states that males were more aggressive and insulting, while female discourse was more aligned and supportive, reflected in the fact that females used three times as many representations of smiles or laughter.

Other gender differences include the tendency of males to use more justifiers and references to quantity or place more than females do. Males are also more likely than females to convey "their opinions, and use judgmental phrases, action verbs, grammatical errors, contradictions, and rhetorical questions". Females, on the other hand, are more likely to use "relative clauses, hedges, intensive adverbs, subordinating conjunctions, references to emotion, personal pronouns, self-derogatory comments, questions, compliments, apologies and tag questions". Males tend to have a longer mean length of sentences (Hills, 2000:8-9).

Baron (2005:4) reports that females tend to use more politeness indicators than males, whereas males more frequently interrupt woman than vice versa. More generally, women (on average) tend to use language as a tool for facilitating social interaction, whereas males are more prone to use language for conveying information.

When it comes to sentence length, Poynton , as cited in Gyllgård, (2006:7) claims that "there is limited evidence that girls produce longer sentences than boys but that in adulthood the reverse may be true". Anastasi, as cited in Gyllgård, (2006:7), on the other hand, found that girls in several studies used longer and "more mature sentence structure than boys". Girls also begin to use sentences earlier than boys.

## **2.2 Computer- mediated Communication**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to "a group of interpersonal communication systems used for sending messages to individuals or groups, mainly over the Internet via computer". CMC is classified into two different modes: synchronous or asynchronous. The synchronous mode of CMC requires participants to be communicating in real-time. The asynchronous mode does not require interlocutors to be online at the same time. It can be between two people, or one-to-one, or from one person to multiple interlocutors, or one-to-many (Herring, 1994:11).

An & Frick (2002:1) explain that, in comparison to the face-to-face communication, a major disadvantage of text-based CMC is the lack of visual and audible cues for body language or gestures can often convey important meanings.

Gower (2006:4) shows that CMC has a number of advantages. First, CMC is place and time independent. Second, CMC provides more time to think. In other words, it allows users to have more time to analyze and reflect on the content and to compose thoughtful responses. In addition, CMC allows for self-paced writing. Finally, CMC can provide a more comfortable environment and discussion opportunities for users who do not perform well in spontaneous face-to-face discussion because they are shy or because their native language is not the same as the other users.

Although CMC does inhibit some cues such as personal identity or individuating details (dress, location, demeanor, expressiveness), there is no evidence to suggest that all other cues are also inhibited. With e-mail communication, some information about social categories or social identity such as gender or educational or first language background cues is likely

to be inferred in the relative absence of interpersonal context cues (Corney et al, 2002:2).

However, much research has been done on the use of computer mediated communication, which is very much like communicating within a text message. Much of the research involving computer-mediated communication has shown that self disclosure rates can increase while using computer mediated communication. Also it was shown that using computer-mediated communication can decrease the symptoms of shyness that are experienced within face to face conversations. In other words, shyness is reduced online (Gower, 2006:4).

Rossetti (2000:2) states that e-mail posting would most probably rank the closest to spoken language than any other written text.

Shea, as cited in Rossetti, (2000:2), claims that e-mail is often written as if the message were spoken out with few attempts to edit the text at all – and writing e-mail messages back and forth is often referred to as "holding a conversation online."

Corney et al. (2002:1) affirm that e-mail is much like spoken communication in that e-mail is more rarefied. With e-mail, participants cannot see each other's faces, hear each other's voices or identify gestures or any other visual cues. Senders of e-mail use emotext language to resemble facial expressions of joy, sadness etc.

Duthler (2006:1) declares that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is less suited for social and negotiation tasks than face-to-face communication because it restricts more communication cues than face-to-face communication.

Herring, as cited in Duthler (2006:2), shows that e-mail allows communicators more control over planning, composing, editing, and delivering messages than face-to-face communication.

### **2.3 Gender in E-mail Communication**

Men and women use language and converse differently even though they technically speak the same language. Empirical evidence suggest that there exist gender differences in written communication, face to face interaction and in computer mediated communication.

One can only expect there be a noticeable difference in the language men and women use to discuss issues online. In fact an absence of such differences would be surprising when one considers the different upbringing and consequent socialization and integration of individuals of both sexes in society (Rossetti, 2000:2).

Picken (2003:3) explains that some studies indicate that e-mail communication makes it less suitable for maintaining relationships than face-to-face communication (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2001; Walther, 1996). Other studies suggest it is, instead, more suitable for management and coordination of activities (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Therefore, the e-mail communication may facilitate an instrumental communication style more commonly associated with men.

Herring (1994: introduction) claims that "men and women have recognizably different styles in posting to the Internet" and that "women and men have different communicative ethics". This is in contrast to the understanding that the Internet provides "a gender-less, age-less, race-less and any-other-bias- less opportunity for interaction" (Shea, as cited in Rossetti,2000:2).

The different characteristic online styles women and men have echo the differences of culturization and integration into society. Moreover, "the male style is characterized by

adversariality – put-downs, strong, often continuous assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self promotion, and sarcasm"; while the female style, in contrast, is characterized by "supportiveness and attenuation" with expressions of appreciation, thanking and community building; as well as apologizing, expressing doubt, asking questions, and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions" (Herring,1994:3-4).

Corney et al. (2002:3) show that men's online conversation resembles "report talk", rather than "rapport talk" which women tend to favour. In other words, men are more "proactive" by directing speech at solving problems while women are more "reactive" to the contribution of others, agreeing, understanding and supporting.

According to Herring (1994:4) emails produced by women are short and their participation is driven by their desire to keep the communication going rather than the desire to achieve consensus.

Picken (2003:4) concludes that men's writing style seems to be more aggressive while females' seems to be more submissive and supportive. To men email is used to fulfill purposes e.g. making arrangements whereas to women e-mail communication is for social purposes e.g. maintaining personal relationships with friends and family.

Hills (2000:10) illustrates that females use more emoticons or graphic accents in their communication than males. Graphic accents are punctuation symbols that are combined to add expressiveness or emotion to text (for example :- ) :-( or ;-)). Witmer and Katzman, as cited in Hills (2000:10), suggest that this increased use of graphic accents by females perhaps

reflected the gender-preferential trait of females to express emotion.

Gender differences have also been observed in studies of some forms of computer mediated communication. Baron (2005:5) reports that on listservs and newsgroups (both of which constitute asynchronous, many-to-many CMC), males tended to be more adversarial and to write longer messages than females; females tended to be more supportive in their postings, to write shorter messages, and to apologize more than males.

### **3. The Study**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this section, the researchers will analyze 60 emails posted by Iraqi students at the Department of English, Shat Al Arab University College. The analyses conducted are to show the gender differences concerning the use of English sentence type and sentence modifiers. The students were not aware of the purpose of this research for they have sent their emails to the Department email address on different topics related to teaching and other departmental related issues. The researchers count the numbers of occurrences for sentence modifiers, and then count the number of occurrences of each by males and females.

#### **3.2 Hypothesis**

On the hypothesis that there are gender differences among Iraqi learners of English in the use of sentence type and sentence modifiers, the current study is based.

#### **3.3 Subjects**

The group studied consisted of 60 students, 30 males and 30 females, and all of them are about the same age (18-20). The subjects are first stage students at Department of English, Shat Al Arab

University College, Basrah, 2007-2008. They have been all taught the types of the English sentence and also how to use sentence modifiers, as part of the curricula in composition and grammar courses.

### **3.4 Procedure**

60 student postings were chosen for the study. These postings were originally sent to the Department of English at Shat Al Arab University College for there is an email allocated for discussing any problem related to teaching, any suggestions and to send any participation for the magazine run by the department. After getting permission from the students, these postings were used in this study. The postings were collected during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2nd semester, 2007-2008. Thus, the subjects were not aware of the purpose of this study. A transcript consisting of these postings was analyzed. The transcript was compiled and downloaded. The transcript was then saved to Microsoft Word. Next, the postings were separated by gender, resulting in two sets of transcripts. The names of students were known to the researchers during the process. Each transcript was then coded for sentence types and sentence modifiers.

### **3.5 Analysis**

Table 1 sheds light on the use of sentence type by male and female learners.

Table 1: Occurrence of Sentence Types

Gender	No. of sentences	Simple	Percentage	Compound	Percentage	Complex	Percentage	Complex-Compound	Percentage
Male	267	168	62.92	46	17.22	44	16.47	9	3.37
Female	272	213	78.30	33	12.13	24	8.82	2	0.73
Total	539	381	70.68	79	14.65	68	12.61	11	2.04

Generally, the analysis of the postings shows that there exist differences between males and females in the use of sentence types. It indicates that females use more simple sentences in their writing than males, in that it can be seen that females use 213 simple sentences, whereas males only 168. More precisely, the percentage of the simple sentences in females' writings is 78.30%, which is higher than that of males, 62.92%.

In all other sentence types, the table above reveals that males use compound, complex, and complex-compound sentences more than females. The number of compound sentences used by males and females are 46 (17.22%) and 33 (12.13%), respectively. Additionally, male learners use 44 (16.47%) complex sentences, but female ones use 24 (8.82%) only. And the analysis of complex-compound sentences used uncovers that both males and females rarely use this type of sentences. However, it shows that males make more use than females, 9 (3.37%) and 2 (0.73%) respectively.

Table 2 below presents the use of sentence modifiers<sup>1</sup> by male and female learners.

**Table 2: Occurrence of Sentence Modifiers**

<b>Sentence Modifier</b>	<b>No. of occurrences</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Certainly</i>	18	11	61.11	7	38.88
<i>Of course</i>	13	7	53.84	6	46.15
<i>Definitely</i>	3	3	100	0	0
<i>Surely</i>	11	6	54.54	5	45.45
<i>Perhaps</i>	17	4	23.52	13	76.47
<i>Maybe</i>	8	2	25	6	75
<i>Probably</i>	5	1	20	4	80
<i>In fact</i>	21	12	57.14	9	42.85
<i>Naturally</i>	3	2	66.66	1	33.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>48</b>		<b>51</b>	
<b>Percentage</b>		<b>48.48%</b>			<b>51.51%</b>

<sup>1</sup>Other sentence modifiers, like adverbials, interjections, vocatives, appositives, and relative clauses have not been considered in the present study, as they made no significant occurrences.

In terms of analyzing the general use of sentence modifiers, females have slightly higher average of usage than did the males. However, the difference is not highly significant (51.51 vs. 48.48). Further, it has been found that female learners exceeded male ones in using those sentence modifiers expressing probability and uncertainty (*perhaps, maybe,* and *probably*). For instance, the sentence modifier *perhaps* has been used 13 times by females, but only 4 by males. On the contrary, sentence modifiers denoting certainty or fact reporting, such as *certainly, of course, definitely, surely, in fact,* and *naturally*, have proven to be features that characterize males' postings. For example, the sentence modifier *certainly* has been in use 11 times by males and 7 by females.

### 3.6 Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of the postings of Iraqi learners of English shows that there are differences among males in females in using both certain sentence types and sentence modifiers. First, it has been found that females use more simple sentences than males, whereas males tend to use more compound, complex, and complex-compound sentences than females. This can be justified by the finding that women tend more than men to express themselves in a simple way and their style is characterized by supportiveness and attenuation with expressions of appreciation, thanking and community building, whereas men tend to seek status, powerfulness, dominance and their style is characterized by strong and continuous assertions (Herring, 1994:4-5).

The other aspect analyzed in this study is the use of sentence modifiers, which reveals that men and women only slightly differ from each other in using this kind of modifiers. It has been shown that women slightly exceeded men in using these modifiers. But the outstanding finding is that women use more sentence modifiers expressing doubt and uncertainty, whereas men use more modifiers referring to certainty. Herring

(1994:4) states that females' style is often associated with expressions of appreciation, thanking and community building; as well as apologizing, expressing doubt, asking questions, and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions, whereas men, on the contrary use more assertive.

Another possible factor could be the culture. Lakoff, as cited in Nemati and Bayer (2007:9), believes that gender differences in language usage reflect different and unequal roles and status. She proposes that because of the low status of women and the social pressure on them to talk like a lady, women as compared to men tend to use more hedges, intensifiers, super polite forms, question intonations, doubt expressions, ... etc.

To sum up the conclusions that the researchers have arrived at, it can be stated that:

- 1- There exist gender differences among Iraqi learners on English at the university level with regard to the use of English sentence type.
- 2- There are slight differences between males and females in using sentence modifiers.
- 3- Males tend to use more sentence modifiers expressing certainty, and females use more modifiers denoting probability.
- 4- The social roles given to males and females could result in gendered-language, i.e. some of the differences between males and females are caused by culture and the community they are in. one example is the use of "certainty" and "probability" sentence modifiers.

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